

Beyond Reasonable Drought

Doug Avery

“The largest room in the world is the room for improvement”.

Bonavaree Farm today is a 1500 ha property with an additional 280 ha lease block. It is one of NZ's leading sheep and beef properties after going through change and transformation.

In the late 1990s Bonavaree plunged into terrible droughts. 17 years out of 19 the farm failed to receive its long term average rainfall. The farming system, which was based on ryegrass and clover, failed, sending the property and the Avery family into a downward spiral.

In 1998 Doug listened to Dr Derrick Moot deliver a paper on using lucerne as a primary grazing plant. That hour, that day, changed the journey of that farm. Bonavaree had been growing lucerne for 80 years but it was mostly used for seed production and hay or silage. Today lucerne, lucerne-grass mixes and other legumes are the base of Bonavaree Farm's feed systems.

Doug started on that journey of change. The first four years were worse than where the farm had been, but each year the threads of success became evident, small rays of light, enough to keep Doug on that journey. Some urged Doug to turn back but he knew the road he had been on was broken.

In 2004 the Avery's son Fraser arrived home and with new legs the momentum picked up. The NZ Landcare Trust set up a science project with Sustainable Farming Fund money. The Starborough Flaxbourne Soil Conservation group became the vehicle for completion of the journey. It looked at soils, landscapes, climate, social science, production and conservation plants, and farming systems.

Legumes leverage water. They produce twice the dry matter per ml of water compared with grass. Evermore they create higher performance in stock. Stock performance has lifted through the roof and the downward spiral which was destroying Bonavaree has been reversed.

The property today looks at the whole farm environment seeing natural, human and financial capital as equal in importance. Native areas are expanding, education and learning of people is expanding and the financial capital base of the farm is growing.

Data collection is central to Bonavaree and smart computer programmes like Farmax are central to the management of Bonavaree. These systems have enabled the farm to maximise the utilisation of feed and provide the best mix of animals to turn pasture into dollars.

The farm is situated in one of New Zealand's driest areas but performs in the top end for performance.

Innovation and change has led the Avery family away from certain failure to a future where the sky is the limit.

“Sustainability was not business as usual with a few concessions but a new road”