

WOOL PRODUCER SHORES UP LAND TO SHORE UP PROFITS



Brendon Lunney remembers reading as a schoolboy about how water was washing away Australia's farmland. He grew up, studied arts and seemed bound for other things when, at the age of 27, he bought a farm.

Now, three decades later, the reality of his early school learning and the devastation wrought by water washing through eroding gullies have become all too apparent.

Measurements logged by scientists funded by the Land, Water and Wool program on his farm "Bogolara", near Yass in south-eastern NSW, have shown that a 50mm rainfall event can wash away 60 tonnes of soil from one gully alone, taking with it valuable phosphorus and nitrogen. It ends up in the Murrumbidgee River. Repeated all over the Murray Darling Basin, it's not difficult to see how this scenario is silting up the entire length of Australia's vital inland arteries and costing farmers.

Ramifications for 37,000 wool producers

"The discussion about erosion has been around a long time," says Brendon, 58, who farms his 1627 hectare wool property with his son, James, 28.

"Stock form tracks, tracks form waterways and waterways wash away soil," he says.

"These are things you know happen in theory but you don't see your country disappearing. When we measured what was coming out the bottom of the gully, my jaw dropped - everybody's jaws dropped.

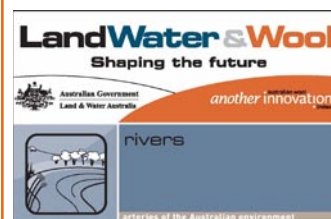
"One tonne of soil is really only a front end loader's worth, and we wouldn't complain about that, but now every time we get 50mm of rain we know that we're also losing significant tonnes of topsoil from our land."

The on-farm research trial, completed this year, was part of Land, Water and Wool – a \$20 million national research program which aimed to boost the sustainability and profitability of wool growers. The findings of the program have significant ramifications for the nation's 37,000 wool producers who manage about 85 million hectares or about 12 per cent of the continent's landmass.

"The sustainable use of natural resources is likely to be increasingly important along with the need to demonstrate minimal impact on the environment," the investigation's final report warns.

"The water issue is very important because what we do on our farms affects everybody down the track, down to Adelaide and out to the sea," Brendon says.

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Land, Water and Wool was a \$20 million national program which aimed to boost the sustainability and profitability of wool growers. The program was a joint investment by wool growers through Australian Wool Innovation Limited and Land and Water Australia, with support also coming from Meat and Livestock Australia. For more information, visit www.landwaterwool.gov.au



Profits greater than cost

A foundation member of his local Landcare group, he says the erosion research on his place has been invaluable. He has since built a 13 megalitre dam at the top of the 400 metre gully, fenced off the gully, and plans to replant thousands of trees when it rains again to shore up his land and stop it washing away. Paradoxically, a long period without rain means he can't be sure of the impact of this restoration on his bottom line as yet.

The rehabilitation has cost him 10 hectares of land he previously grazed, but the potential upside for profit is far greater, he believes.

"We'll be able to divide the paddocks into a smaller area because we now have another water source and smaller areas are easier to manage for better pasture regrowth. The trees will provide wind buffers and protection for stock in bad weather and we'll lose less soil."

Brendon knows farmers will face more pressure in an increasingly volatile climate and says it's clear that governments are regulating against environmentally abusive farmers. He says the Land, Water and Wool investigation has shown that wool growers have a vital role to play in taking care of the land in the 21st century.

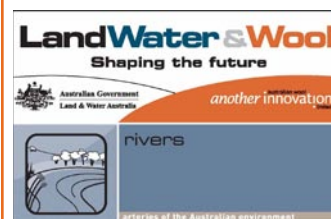
"Some people say we shouldn't have sheep and that we should have soft-footed animals but people still want to be fed so we are looking for ways to tread as softly as we can."

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More information on the program and full details of the study in Gary Caitcheon's report *Managing Gully Erosion in the NSW Tablelands to Improve Water Quality and Maintain Productive Wool Pastures* are available at www.landwaterwool.gov.au

A 13 megalitre dam now sits at the top of the gully, providing a new water source and reducing erosion.

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