

## Future Farming in Gippsland

More than sixty people attended the first Future Foods & Fibre field day, held at Ross and Sue Svenson's Stony Creek property on 1 November, 2007.

Future Foods & Fibre is a new project that is exploring the concept of sustainability within the context of primary production in Gippsland. Looking at a number of different industries – including meat, dairy, wool, fishing, horticulture and wine – the project will consider the strategies Gippsland's producers should be adopting to ensure their future viability.

The first field day focused on environmental risk management and the preservation of many farmers' most valuable asset – the land. Enviromeat supplier, Ross Svenson, freely admits that he is farming for capital gains, and as such, pays particular attention to protecting the remnant vegetation on his properties.

Participants were treated to a farm walk through many acres of fenced off bushland and saw for themselves the benefits that large tracts of native vegetation can bring to a property. As well as the obvious aesthetic benefits, participants noted the shelter provided by the vegetation, and the abundant birdlife present. Further evidence of the property's biodiversity was found towards the end of the walk, in the form of a pair of lace monitors lounging happily in a hayshed.

The field day was not about conserving the environment at the expense of production, however. Respected consultant, John Mulvany, performed an on-site analysis of the Svensons' pasture management, and found it was consistent with his theories about manipulating the inputs (fertiliser, weed control, sowing and grazing) to maximize the output (grass). West Gippsland CMA board member, farmer and former BeefCheque Project Manager Ken Lamb, spoke about the productivity benefits of implementing an EMS, while Ross and Sue shared their views on sustainable farming for the future.

Participants were not shy in sharing their own views about sustainability, and how it relates to profitability in a changing agricultural landscape. Future Foods and Fibre organizer, Jenny O'Sullivan, welcomed the debate.

"The purpose of the project is to get everyone involved in food and fibre production in Gippsland thinking about the future," she says. "We want to develop strategies to make sure that there will always be a production base, and a market, for food and fibre produced in the region."

Ross and his wife, Sue, have also revegetated significant tracts of their properties, beginning some twenty years ago with a severely denuded creek bed

that was at risk from erosion. They have been fencing off and revegetating riparian and other environmentally sensitive areas on each new property ever since.

As is often the case with farming couples, their reasons for revegetating and their opinion of the impacts of their efforts, differ. Ross focuses on the aesthetics and the potential for carbon credits, while Sue is adamant that the shelter provided by the trees is valuable. “When we’re out working in the paddocks and it’s hot or windy, I know where I’d rather be!”

One thing Ross and Sue are in definite accord about is the potential for South Gippsland’s meat producers to capitalise on the growing market for grass fed meat. Ross has noted a tendency towards environmentally-friendly farming practices, while Sue – like many other consumers – is horrified by the use of artificial hormones in the feedlot industry.

Both Ross and Sue have been actively involved with GippsBeef, the meat producers’ alliance that produces two premium brands, Gippsland Natural and Enviomeat. Ross was a board member and chairman for many years, while Sue was instrumental in developing the environmental management system (‘EMS’) that underpins the Enviomeat brand.

“Our strength in South Gippsland is our ability to produce grass, and a grass fed product,” says Ross. “People are seeking a clean, green and natural product that has a unique taste, and we’re ideally placed to supply it.”

Developing an EMS for use amongst Gippsland’s meat producers was a daunting task, but Sue was the perfect person for the job. For many years, she had been documenting the processes Ross was implementing to manage the environmental impacts of farming on their properties.

“Ross always had a concern for the environment in all of the decisions he made in relation to the farm,” she recalls. “The first thing was always to fence off the waterways, and he’s tried a few other things that were a little bit different. I thought it wouldn’t hurt to have those things documented. Nothing’s ever a quick fix – I wanted to be able to look back later and compare the results, and to make sure that our memory was correct.”

Sue also thought that the development of some form of accountable documentation would make it easier for farmers to be rewarded for good environmental stewardship. “I wasn’t thinking about a marketing opportunity, more that there would be some sort of government subsidy for farmers who look after their land.”

Sue’s still hoping that will happen, but in the meantime, farmers who implement an EMS and supply Enviomeat are rewarded for their efforts with a higher price

for their meat. Currently, Gippsland Natural suppliers are receiving \$3.30 per kg (mainly heifers), while Enviromeat producers are receiving \$4 per kg (mainly steers). In comparison, conventional producers are receiving around \$3.00 per kg for their meat.

Some producers may be hesitant about the amount of record keeping and auditing required to keep abreast of their EMS obligations, and to satisfy the annual audit. In Ross and Sue's opinion, however, the extra effort is worth it in terms of the increase in capital value it brings to a property.

But it's not just the increase in capital value that good environmental management brings to a farming operation that makes it worthwhile. It can also add value to the bottom line. For example, Ross and Sue use soil and pasture consultant, John Gallienne, to evaluate their pasture performance and advise on the best inputs and management to improve their pasture. Healthy riparian vegetation reduces the amount of fertiliser lost as run-off, and helps to keep water clean for stock. And well-thought out fencing and laneways means that less labour is required to move stock throughout the properties.

Ross has also discovered that paying a sharefarmer to sow and harvest down legumes is a much quicker and cheaper way to renovate pastures than many other conventional methods. He has recently renovated eighty acres of poor pasture on his Stony Creek property this way, planting snowpeas followed by a mixture of two clovers and two ryes. The results have been impressive.

Ross and Sue's appreciation of the environmental values of their properties, and the use of their EMS to continually improve their environmental management, were recognised during the recent audit of Enviromeat producers. Noel Stewart, an independent auditor, noted that "their appreciation of the environmental values and attributes of their properties was readily evident. This was clearly seen in the standards achieved in waste removal, weed control and infrastructure improvements."

He also praised Ross and Sue for their increasing use of the EMS as a business tool for whole farm planning, and for identifying and monitoring improvements in their environmental performance.

*GippsBeef Pty Ltd promotes the production and sale of high quality, free-range beef and lamb. All meat supplied for sale under the Gippsland Natural brand must be grass fed, hormone and antibiotic free, and of sufficiently high quality to be graded under the strict Meat Standards of Australia grading system. Meat supplied for sale under the Enviromeat brand must meet the additional requirement of being produced in compliance with a certified, independently audited, EMS.*

*An independent audit is only necessary for producers who wish to supply Enviromeat, and receive a premium for their meat. Producers who simply wish to use an EMS as a business tool for whole farm planning, and for identifying and monitoring improvements in their environmental performance, do not need to go through the audit process.*

*GippsBeef offers training and assistance to help producers understand and implement their own EMS, and take advantage of the benefits it offers as a business tool. Contact Jenny O'Sullivan on 5663 2386 or [sulliva@dcsi.net.au](mailto:sulliva@dcsi.net.au) for details.*