

Road to Regenerative Agriculture

CASE STUDY

Judith Samways & Heath Matheson | 325 acres

Judith and Heath purchased 325 acres in the Upper Kiewa Valley in March 2020, describing the property as a 'blank canvas' with dilapidated infrastructure and the opportunity to observe and plan from scratch. They joined the project keen to learn about reading the land, assessing its condition, making decisions about stock and improving its capacity to sequester carbon. In short, how to farm in alignment with their values.

“Our vision is to combine grazing, agroforestry, conservation and tourism to build a diverse and profitable enterprise. We want the business to be a carbon sink and to continually improve the health of the soil and land over time.

Project + farm summary

Judith and Heath are situated on 325 acres in the Upper Kiewa Valley.

They agisted cattle from April to July 2020 and purchased their first stock, 12 steers, in November 2020.

All infrastructure including fencing, water and vehicle access was in need of upgrade or replacement, catalysing a whole-farm planning process that made the Road to Regenerative Agriculture project especially timely.



This program came along and we jumped at it. It's been fantastic and is going to steer our direction for a long time. ~ Heath

Motivations

I didn't like the inputs of conventional farming for multiple reasons. For one, I looked at how much cash is spent each year and thought 'that's not the pathway we want to go down'. And through reading and research, we knew there were people doing it in a better way. ~ Heath

We know with climate change that we're still going to get rain but it's going to be less predictable, much harder to rely on traditional seasons. ~ Judith

Project reflections

So, what did the Road to Regenerative Agriculture project look like in practice for Judith and Heath?

There was a stack we did based on Graeme's suggestions. But probably the biggest one was increasing our stock density. We'd been doing gut fill haphazardly and very long recovery on paddocks for quite a while... but he confirmed the reasons behind all the things we were trying.
~ Heath

The biggest thing for us, because we're starting from scratch, is that we've been able to design all the water. It's been invaluable for knowing what kind of infrastructure we're going to need and where to put the money. ~ Judith

I feel like we're proceeding down a farming path that's a lot less variable and risky, in terms of cash flow and stress levels, than is standard in the industry – which is what we need! ~ Heath

Project highlights

Having the solidarity and accountability of a small, focused group was a boon for Judith and Heath, helping them stay on course while building stronger relationships in their local community.

Something that made it less challenging was the fact that we weren't on our own. There was this crew of six who we could meet up with every fortnight who were all trialling the same stuff, all having a go and we've all got our stories. For me, having Tom [a R2R participant] a kilometre away... we could bounce ideas off each other all the time. Without a program like this, if I'd have come home without that fortnightly support it would've been quite an isolating experience and you'd probably question yourself a lot more. The support was invaluable. ~ Heath

Graeme Hand's mentorship was a highlight.

His [Graeme's] knowledge is just phenomenal. He has this breadth and depth of experience, both academic and hands on, that's amazing. We had discussions about everything from processing meat to soil and landscape function. I wish we could bottle it! ~ Judith

Hats off to Graeme, because he didn't give us an incredibly complicated grazing spreadsheet or chart to follow... it was Safe To Fail areas and observation. Teach yourself to observe and then respond to what you're observing on your own property, at that time of year, in that season. It's about building your own capacity to understand what's going on and then respond accordingly, whereas some of the other ones [projects] we've looked at have felt very prescriptive. Graeme is giving us skills to do it ourselves, not just follow what someone says. ~ Judith



Judith and Heath observed a ripple effect in their region, with friends and neighbours tuning into their changes and, however subtly, reflecting on their own approach to farming.

Lots of people are interested. Their ears prick up now. And I think they're keen to watch and see how we go. ~ Heath

Even our highly experienced, more traditional high-input dairy farmer neighbour next door (we're probably going to agist his heifers over winter in density), he came and had a look and said, "There's a lot of brown grass in there", and I said, "Well we need enough brown grass so that when they eat out the green grass and trample the brown it covers the ground fully." And that's very hard to argue against. And said, "Oh yeah, I see." ~ Heath

Project challenges

Like many of the project's participants, Judith and Heath experienced their fair share of external (and feral) pressures, meaning that moving stock on time and following Graeme's advice to the letter wasn't always possible. However, they struck their own balance and continue to implement personally and contextually sustainable changes.

The ideal is to be shifting them [the cattle] a couple of times a day. Sometimes we couldn't quite do that, but it was at least daily. The stock density is much higher than before. ~ Judith

I set up a couple of Safe to Fail areas. Some of them failed! Feral deer just ran straight through. ~ Heath

We're happy for this place to be a research experiment. We're not relying on cattle income at this stage so we're just going to have a go at getting it right. ~ Heath

Farm future

The Road to Regenerative Agriculture project has shaped Judith and Heath's future in unexpected ways, including their business direction.

You've got to do the right breeding to get the right cattle, sheep, etc, that are going to thrive on a mix of grass and have the right gut flora. So we were tossing up whether we were going to do a trading operation or a breeding operation, and I think we've now decided that we're going to go with the latter so we can get a decent herd for doing this type of agriculture. It has shaped which way we're going to go on the cattle side of things. ~ Heath

By questioning 'the farming norm' and embracing holistic management, Judith and Heath were able to sidestep sizeable upfront expenses (like a tractor) while reducing input costs, saving them money – and stress.



I feel really grateful that we've had the opportunity to do it at the start. If we'd gone and put all our infrastructure in and then done it I think we'd be kicking ourselves, and possibly done a whole bunch of stuff that was unnecessary. For us, it was right project, right time. Invaluable. ~ Judith

It's given us a lot more confidence in the decisions we make – particularly the big ticket ones like infrastructure. We're making decisions that are going to stand us in good stead for the long term. We're really lucky. ~ Judith

When we first bought the place people were saying, "you're going to need this and that" – we could've spent two or three hundred thousand dollars without even thinking just based on all of that expectation. There are some things we're going to need to invest in, but they're not what we thought two years ago. ~ Judith

I'm pretty glad we didn't walk out and spend 140 grand on a tractor that we don't need. Not a bad saving! ~ Heath



If you loved reading this regenerative case study, you can find more (including short films) at kclg.org.au. With special thanks to Kiewa Catchment Landcare Group, Graeme Hand (handfortheland.com) and Judith Samways & Heath Matheson.

