

2005

Adapting dryland farming to climate change

Seven years of dry weather and relentless wind erosion in the early 2000s had devastated the Flaxbourne-Starborough landscape of South Marlborough, one of the country's earliest farmed areas.

Doug Avery's Grassmere farm Bonavaree was one of those affected. "Over-grazing during the long dry was harming the financial, environmental and emotional sustainability of the farm," recalls Barbara Stuart, regional co-ordinator of the NZ Landcare Trust (NZLT). "People like Doug were stressed, heartbroken, even a bit ashamed about what was happening."

In 2004, NZLT helped bring a group of locals together to form a soil conservation group – and successfully apply for SFF funding. The late, revered Awatere farmer John (JL) Peter became the Starborough Flaxbourne Soil Conservation Group (SFSCG) chair. The focus was on six key areas: farming systems, soils, dryland plants, human impact, landscape options and climate. Bonavaree became the project's focus farm.

The idea gained momentum locally, soon spreading to the dry east coast of both islands. Barbara Stuart recalls the stir among workshop participants one day

in 2005 when systems analyst Graeme Ogle, one of the specialists on hand, proposed a new seasonal grazing system for affected farms.

"The Avery family already knew a lot about lucerne. But Doug immediately sniffed out the potential for using it as a green feed rather than a supplement – a way to rapidly grow lambs so they are finished before the summer dry sets in. Soon he was using it at Bonavaree – and the results have been remarkable."

The lucerne breakthrough was only one of the measures flowing out of this landmark project centred on the challenges of adapting dryland farming to climate change.

In 2008, around 400 people gathered at Bonavaree to attend a "Beyond Reasonable Drought" field day. That year the SFSCG won a prize for showing leadership in helping improve farmland affected by drought.

As Doug Avery said: "The moment of truth came when I realized that we could not keep on farming as we were, if we were to remain financially and environmentally sustainable."



Top left: Grasslands' conference delegates check out saltbush planted to conserve eroded soil while providing fodder for stock.

Above: Fraser Avery addressing the Beyond Reasonable Drought field day of 400 participants.



Ewe hoggets finish off a lucerne stand in the summer dry.

Top right: Valley floor plantings of lucerne take advantage of the deepest soils and rainfall run-off from hillsides.

Above: Protecting remnants of native vegetation.