

2001

Miss McRae's dream: Sustainable hill country farming

Set high among the steep Wairoa hills, the McRae Trust farm is renowned as a place where sustainable land management practices are actively pursued. When Miss May McRae bequeathed her farm to the nation in 1975, the deed included a requirement “to demonstrate for the purposes of the betterment of farming on East Coast type hill country.”

In 2001, an SFF project based on the property took Miss McRae's dream to the next level. Over three years, farmers from around the district flocked to a range of field days successfully linking profit and conservation on steeper hill country farmland. Erosion control planting,

riparian management, forestry and native flora were among the issues thoroughly explored.

A leading edge of this activity was helping farmers gain a more informed understanding of the range of soils up there on the hilly McRae block – knowledge they could then readily transfer to their own properties.

Local understanding of soil capabilities was fairly patchy at the start. Trust chairman Peter Manson recalled how a few farmers turned up to the field days with soil maps; most were less knowledgeable but still keen to get stuck in.

“We were able to employ the skills of specialists such as Tony Rhodes from

AgFirst and the late Murray Jessen, a soil scientist from Landcare Research. Murray's course, based on a detailed soil analysis of the block and held at the Woolshed, was highly successful and very effective.”

Activity of this kind, mixed in with vigorous debate and field walks, helped local farmers understand the need for better tools to make informed decisions based on the knowledge of soils and their values.

Importantly, it led to the formation of a “Growing Business from the Ground Up” soils group with members doing a working analysis of their own farms, Peter recalled.

“This has been the major success of the whole project with many farmers now having skills that are crucial for the future of their individual businesses.” – PETER MANSON

