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Regenerative grazing practices can increase soil carbon stocks: Science for the conversation.

Introduction

Soils have a crucial role in mitigating climate change by storing carbon that would otherwise end up in the atmosphere [1]–[3]. High-profile global initiatives such as "4p1000", an international political effort launched at the United Nation's Summit in Paris (2015) serves to preserve and increase soil organic carbon stocks, improve food security and tackle climate change [4]. This document establishes the scientific case for promoting regenerative grazing practices to increase soil organic carbon stocks. This scientific case demonstrates there are alternative ways of practicing beef farming that can have a net positive impact on greenhouse gas emissions, through greater storage of carbon in the landscape.

Highlights

- Soils play a crucial role in mitigating climate change by storing carbon that would otherwise end up in the atmosphere.
- Soil carbon storage represents a true win-win strategy: It takes carbon out of the atmosphere, where it is causing harm, and locks it in the soil where it is beneficial to soil health e.g. nutrient and water retention resulting in greater plant (and animal) productivity.
- Carbon enters the soil through the process of plant decomposition where it may remain for decades, centuries or even millennia.
- Soil are the largest terrestrial store of carbon, storing approximately three times the amount of carbon in vegetation and twice the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. Therefore, even small changes in soil carbon stocks can have a significant impact on climate change mitigation.
- The world has lost about 25% of soil carbon stocks in the topsoil from poor land use management. Good news: soil carbon stocks can be replenished by implementing regenerative management practices that maximise plant productivity (above and below-ground) including time-controlled grazing and the incorporation of legumes, mixed species and deep-rooted perennials.
- The range of potential soil carbon storage in Australian grazing lands under improved land use management, based on best available scientific evidence, is likely to be between 0.05 and 0.8t C per hectare per year. The range is dependent on the type of management implemented and site-specific climate and soil properties.
- While the gains in soil carbon may be relatively small on a per hectare basis, rolling these practices out over Australia's approximately 10 million hectares of degraded grassland, will be hugely impactful on Australia's greenhouse gas budget.

1. Background on soil organic carbon

What is soil organic carbon and how is it formed?

Soil organic matter (around 62% of which is carbon) is composed of plant residues in varying states of decay, and the microbes, both living and dead, that have fed on the residues. Soil organic carbon formation starts when plants suck up carbon (in the form of CO_2) from the atmosphere and use it to store energy and build their stems, leaves and roots. Plants add carbon to the soil both by leaking it in gradually while they live (through root exudates) or when they die through decomposition which adds above ground plant biomass (e.g., plant leaves, branches, stem) and belowground plant biomass (e.g., dead roots, carbon substances from root exudates, and microbial biomass) directly to the soil organic carbon pool. After carbon enters the soil in the form of organic matter it may persist in the soil for decades, centuries or even millennia [5] particularly if it is encapsulated within microaggregates or chemically bonded to soil mineral surfaces [6] as it is protected from microbial attack.

What are the benefits of increasing soil organic carbon?

Increasing soil organic carbon stocks takes carbon out of the atmosphere, where it is causing harm, and puts it into the soil where it is beneficial to soil health and plant growth. The more carbon there is in the soil, the healthier the soil becomes. Soil organic matter, of which carbon is the largest component improves the soil structure, soil fertility, nutrient retention, water infiltration, water holding capacity and reduces soil erosion and compaction. Therefore, increasing soil carbon in agricultural landscapes is a global environmental benefit, while delivering healthier soils that support greater grass and animal productivity, ensuring food security for our growing population [7]–[9].

How much carbon do soils store?

Soil organic carbon represents a stock of around 1,500-2,400 Gt C in the top meter of soil globally [10], [11]. This stock is approximately three times the stock of carbon in vegetation and twice the stock of carbon in the atmosphere [2]. Therefore, even small changes in carbon stocks can have a significant impact on the atmosphere and climate change. Sequestering organic carbon in soil may potentially, and in a technically feasible manner, remove between 0.79 and 1.54 G t C per year from the atmosphere [12]. To put this into context, this around 20-45% of the annual increase in CO_2 emissions – thereby helping to stabilise the climate [13].

What factors influence soil organic carbon stocks?

The ability to sequester soil carbon is dependent on the soil type, climate and management practices [9], [14]–[17]. Clay soils typically store more carbon. Sandy soils generally store less carbon as the soil microorganisms can access the organic carbon more easily for energy, and the rate of decomposition is accelerated [14]. Rainfall also influences soil organic carbon; it dictates plant productivity and therefore the amount of plant material that enters the soil. In warm climates with high rainfall, the rate of soil organic carbon decomposition is accelerated, whereas in cooler climates there is typically a greater soil organic carbon. Finally, management can increase soil organic carbon by increasing plant productivity with this photosynthetic input being added to the soil carbon pool over time. As land management is the only factor effecting soil organic carbon that humans can control, this is the focus of the next section.

2. Regenerative management practices to increase soil organic carbon

At Packhorse, we apply regenerative principles to increase plant and animal productivity and increase soil organic carbon stocks. Our soil and plant regeneration principles are as follows:

- Plan, monitor and manage soil health
- Maximise living plant production
- Focus on enhancing soil biology to heal and repair soil health
- Introduce biodiversity
- Maximise thickness and availability of ground cover
- Utilise livestock as a natural way of recycling nutrients

Through careful observation, we manage each pasture dependent on its needs and develop careful grazing plans that incorporate some or all of the following in a holistic approach to management.

2.1 Time-controlled grazing

Time-controlled grazing involves the use of smaller paddocks that are heavily stocked for short periods of time, followed by periods of rest that allow the pasture to recover and regenerate before grazing is applied again. The rest period is adjusted to suit the growth rate of the plant and stocking rate is matched to the carrying capacity of the land. Time-controlled grazing of pastures results in an even pasture utilisation and an even distribution of nutrients from cattle excrement, while the increased trampling of animals breaks up the soil surface and enhances the transfer of above-ground plant material into the soil organic carbon pool [18]–[20]. In summary, animal density is used as a tool for soil and pasture revitalisation.

Figure 1: *A visible difference in soil quality from conventionally grazed paddock (left) and time-controlled grazed paddock (right). The richer, darker colour is due to a higher soil organic carbon content. Source: Carbon link (2020).*

2.2 Incorporating mixed species & biodiversity

Areas of grassland with high species diversity comprising multiple grasses and legumes can be more productive, more resilient to periods of drought, and lead to increased soil carbon storage [22]–[24]. Greater productivity is attributed to the complementary functional of plant traits that avoids interspecies competition [25] [26]. It has been demonstrated that high diversity mixtures of perennial grassland plant species store 500% and 600% more soil carbon and nitrogen than a monoculture plot of the same species [27].

2.3 Incorporating legumes and perennial pasture species

Currently available legumes, with good management, can boost grass production by 30-50%, while also providing additional nutritional benefits to livestock. After water, nitrogen is usually the primary nutrient limiting plant growth. Legume pastures, by fixing N from the atmosphere, can remove this limitation, thereby increasing pasture productivity and biomass input to the soil [28]–[30]. An average well-grown legume pasture will fix around 25 kg of nitrogen per tonne of dry matter per year, with extra nitrogen leading to more grass production [31] which ultimately contributes to increased soil organic carbon storage. Research in buffel pastures recorded a 40-100% increase in annual pasture production (dry matter per hectare) through the incorporation of legumes compared to grass only pastures approximately 15 years after establishment on low phosphorus soils [32]. These grass/legume pastures also responded strongly to phosphorus fertiliser application with phosphorous addition resulting in an additional 50% increase in dry matter (Figure 3). Furthermore, leguminous plants typically have longer tap root systems that allow them to access deep moisture and nutrients that are out of reach of more shallow root grass pasture species, resulting in greater productivity and ground cover during extended dry periods.

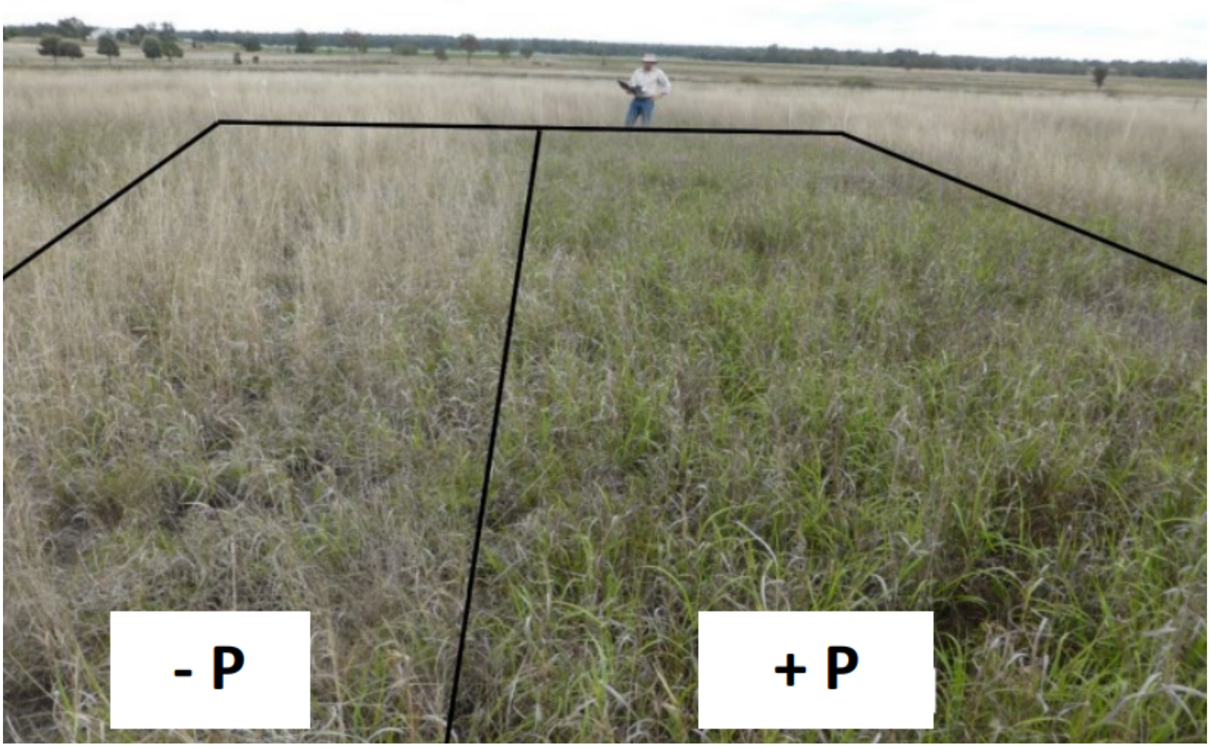

Figure 3: Including legumes and P fertiliser increased grassland production by 100% (Wandoan grazing trial, QLD).

Perennial grasses, compared with annual grasses, generally allocate a greater fraction of productivity to the maintenance of a deeper and more extensive root system [33].The soil carbon contributed by plant root system remains present in the soil for a longer time in comparison to the aboveground residues due to the slower rates of decomposition of organic matter at depth [34].

3. How much soil carbon can Australia's grazing land store?

The best estimate of what can be realistically and technically achieved in Australian soils is likely to range between 0.1 and 0.8 tC per hectare per year [9]. The largest gains are typically found in the first 5 to 10 years after improved management is implemented with the rate diminishing to zero after 40 years [9], [35]. A summary of the most relevant literature for soil carbon gains under improved management is provided in Table 1 below.

Location	Mean rate C sequestration (t C/ha/yr) 0-30 cm[1]	Management factors[2]	Ref.
Global meta-analysis	0.66 0.28 0.57	Legume pasture Grazing management fertilisation	**[36]**
NSW	0.5	Annual and perennial pasture	**[28]**
ACT	0.6 (to 60 cm)	Fertilisation and increased stocking rate	**[37]**
Australian meta-analysis	0.1 to 0.3	Fertilisation, legumes and irrigation	**[9]**
QLD	1.37[3]	Time-controlled grazing	**[18]**
NSW	0.78	Cropping to permanent pasture	**[38]**
NSW	0.5	Pasture phase in cropping and P addition	**[28]**
NSW	0.26-0.72	Pasture improvement using P application	**[39]**
NSW	1.04 to 1.46	Grazing management (strategic & rotational)	**[40]**
NSW	1.09 to 2.47	Organic amendments	**[41]**
QLD	0.28	Pasture plus legume	**[42]**
QLD	0.76	Pasture plus legume	**[43]**
QLD	1.5	Pasture plus legume	**[29]**
ACT	0.6	P fertilisation	**[37]**
NSW	0.46 to 0.55	Liming	**[28]**
NSW and QLD	0.6 to 1.8	Cell grazing	Carbon Link data (personal comm).

[1] *Amount of soil carbon measured to a depth of 30 cm unless stated otherwise.*

[2] *Some values may be conservative given that they monitored the implementation of one management measure. If multiple measures are implemented, this may achieve higher gains.*

[3] *Change in soil carbon stocks not statistically significant over time.*

Table 1: A summary of the most relevant scientific studies on the rate of soil carbon sequestration in Australian grasslands as a result of improved management. Data is stated as a mean change in soil organic carbon in tonnes per hectare per year. This value must be multiplied by 3.67 to determine tonnes of CO2e.

Notes on the baseline for measuring changes in soil carbon.

Rates of change are dependent on the baseline and previous management. For example, converting from a cropping soil that has been heavily tilled will likely result in greater carbon accumulation initially, as you will be starting from a relatively low carbon baseline. The time period over which carbon sequestration is measured is also important – if it is measured over the course of one year, the C gains are likely to be much greater than if changes are measured over a 10-year period as the rate of C accumulation declines over time.

Conclusion

Best management practices, such as time-controlled grazing, improved pasture with mixed species, legumes and perennial grasses can improve the soil organic carbon stocks of Australia's grazing lands. Rolling these practices out over Australia's approximately 10 million hectares of degraded grassland, will be hugely impactful on Australia's GHG budget. Packhorse will continue to collaborate with research organisations, such as QUT (Figure 4), to understand emerging practices (e.g. Biologically Enhanced Agricultural Management, BEAM[4]) and to provide robust data to support the large-scale implementation of regenerative grazing. Overall, Packhorse aims to demonstrate that regenerative agriculture has the potential to achieve multiple objectives: ensuring food security, restoring degraded land and achieving net zero emissions through the storage of carbon in the landscape.

Figure 4: *Packhorse is investing in research to detect small changes in soil organic carbon over time at a lower cost using Eddy Covariance flux towers. Associate Professor David Rowlings (QUT) is pictured with a flux tower at Longreach.*

[4] *This involves extracting the microbial biomass or 'worm juice' from composted plant material and adding it to the soil. There are few studies that have tested its efficacy, but work from the US by soil molecular biologist Dr. David Johnson of New Mexico State University states that microbial mixtures can increase soil carbon content.*

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