



SUCCESSION IN ACTION

WITH LAND CLASS FENCING

► **Location**

Whiteheads Creek, near
Seymour

► **Property size**

200 hectares (494 acres)

► **Landscape**

Low undulating hills (off the
southern edge of the Highlands
plateau) with flats cut by a
series of narrow drainage lines

► **Soils**

Chromosols on low hills,
Dermosols and Sodosols on mid
rise and flats

► **Rainfall**

600 mm av/yr

► **Enterprise**

Merino wethers wool, Angus
beef cattle, lucerne hay

► **Owners**

Philip (pictured) and Anne Smith

‘Succession’ is most often associated with planning for intergenerational farm ownership. However, in Philip and Anne Smith’s case, it can be applied to how they are working with nature to repair and renew their 200 ha property at Whiteheads Creek near Seymour.

On the low hills of the property the perennial native grasses have been retained with only the lower country sown to exotic pastures. ‘Orme Hill’, named after William Orme the original 1884 title holder, was originally part of a large paddock where it was vulnerable to overgrazing. In addition, the western boundary of the hill has a large section where road makers removed the surface gravel along with the shallow topsoil.

Philip and Anne wanted to restore ground cover and soil condition to Orme Hill. In 2013, a land class fencing grant meant the hill could be fenced off to allow better grazing management. Program advice, aimed at increasing the native grass cover, meant stock were excluded from the area over summer to allow the grasses to set seed and gain vigour.

Almost a year later Orme Hill has a pasture height of about 10 cm. Between clumps of mostly weeping grass (*Microlaena stipoides*) and some wallaby grasses (*Rytidosperma* spp. formerly *Austrodanthonia* spp.), capeweed was evident. Philip intended to allow the sheep to crash graze the hill to ensure the weeds did not advance to seed stage. Close inspection of the previously scoured area revealed nature hard at work.



The surface crust was gradually being covered by shallow-rooted dark green mosses and pale green lichen, foundation plants for soil stabilisation and ecological succession. These are the first steps in the establishment of grasses and other plants.

The property runs 1200 Merino wethers as well as 45 Angus cows and calves. At shearing time Philip and Anne are very busy yarding their 19-micron wool sheep, with family member and neighbour Tony Wallis lending a hand. "Tensile strength has become the biggest factor with wool. Stresses to stock such as handling, feed shortages and weather conditions can cause a break in wool growth that then impacts on processing," Tony said.

Philip and Anne give their wethers the best chance for high tensile strength wool. Yarding is conducted with calm patience and post-shearing lice treatments applied. In the paddocks, water is provided in troughs linked to a large dam and the pastures are in good shape.

Retaining native pastures on the rising country through grazing management fits the Smiths' plan to minimise inputs to their farm.

They see advantages not just in reduced cost outlay but in reduced impact on the environment. Inputs are confined to the lower country with perennial ryegrass direct-drilled into clover, as well as to a lucerne paddock that is fertilised. Philip said "the direct drilling reduces damage to our vulnerable soil structure."

The property could be seen as vulnerable, though well on the way to recovery, for another reason – dryland salinity.

The Whiteheads Creek Catchment is identified as a 'high salinity province'. Around 25 years ago much work occurred on recharge and discharge sites, aimed at lowering water tables. On the Smiths' property a large recharge hilltop as well as a discharge zone at the base were fenced out and planted with native trees.

"Before the remediation work the salty discharge area was bare, the ground was exposed and toxic," Philip said.

The Whiteheads Creek Landcare Group, founded in 1986 and one of the state's oldest, was a prime mover behind organising grants and landholders for tree planting.

For Philip, the community cohesion through Landcare was a terrific side benefit of the remedial salinity works.

"And, the great thing we've done at Whiteheads Creek is confirm the connection between the environmental and economic benefit," he said.

The land class fencing of Orme Hill for improved ground cover – as well as other works by the Smiths to protect paddock and creek trees – may also help reduce groundwater recharge and therefore decrease the salinity risk.

- **For more information about improving soil health and the Goulburn Broken Catchment Management Authority's Australian Government funded SoilCare program, visit the Land Health page at www.gbcma.vic.gov.au**
- **For more information on sustainable farm management visit the Agriculture page of the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources at www.economicdevelopment.vic.gov.au**