



# A Forest of Great Potential

## the environmental and economic opportunities of tree farming

**There are two key facets of farmers' motivations to aim for long term viability in their business, both environmental and economic:**

- 1. to ensure the land is protected from degradation to enable sustained levels of production**
- 2. to ensure land is matched to highest value enterprises**

**The uptake of farm forestry in Australia has been relatively slow, but some farmers are making pioneering progress in restoring their land affected by salinity or erosion. They are achieving this through tree planting and other practices, which can also bring financial benefits.**

Jim and Kay Whitem are located at Napier in the SW region of Western Australia. Traditionally this region was predominantly sheep and cattle; however over the past decade farmers have diversified into grapes, canola and forestry practices. The Whitem's farm is 590 hectares with 400 of the most arable used for farming; the rest is remnant bush. Originally their main farming was sheep for wool and they still have some sheep. Now plantation trees are the major enterprise and they cover 350 hectares of the farm. Of this, 100 ha is leased by a prospectus company for tree planting, on a share-farm basis.

The plans for tree planting commenced for the Whitem's in 1988 when Jim joined and chaired a local landcare group – the Napier-King Land Conservation District Committee.

A major issue at the time was the eutrophication of Oyster Harbour, which is close to Albany and 25 kms from the Whitem's "as the crow flies". The Whitem's are in the harbour's catchment as it is fed by the Kalgan River which borders their property. The high level of nutrient rich run-off into the river was causing the problem, and the group saw tree planting as an effective way of reducing this.

Wind erosion was another primary reason for entering into tree farming. This had been a problem for the Whitem's when their land was cleared of trees and they ran more sheep. As president of the landcare group Jim wanted to do more to support landcare principles on his own property. Tree planting was just commencing in the area and everyone was talking about trees.

"We planted a thousand trees to provide a windbreak along a fence line, just to see what would happen. Well, they just leapt out of the ground!"

These trees were Tasmanian Blue Gums which grow well in the sandy soil of the region and they demonstrated impressive growth. This species was also recommended as one of the best for woodchips, producing fine quality paper.

A year later, in 1993, the Whitem's planted one of their poorer, wind-blown paddocks (also prone to water logging) to belts of Blue Gum for commercial timber production. They planted more trees every year until 1997 when the young saplings were hit by a few obstacles.

"1997 was the first year that we had a really bad year with bugs and it was also a very dry spring. We didn't want to outlay thousands of dollars for spray – we've never sprayed our trees – so the beetles killed half of what we planted and we haven't planted any since then."

However, Jim and Kay now have "more trees than we can handle" so the earlier plantings have clearly resulted in a forest of great potential. Initially the trees were to be harvested for woodchips, but Jim started to do some pruning and the prospects for harvesting sawlogs and using the timber in different ways developed.

In 2002 the first two paddocks of 50 hectares planted with trees were commercially harvested for

woodchips. This left about 1,500 pruned trees to continue growing for possible sawlogs, probably in five or six years. An older tree is more stable for sawing because the younger ones are inclined to have more tension wood.

From the original plan to harvest for woodchips the Whittens are now finding other ways of utilising the trees growing on their farm.

“We are doing some value adding of our own to turn the trees into something that will sell. We’re cutting trees down and taking fence posts out of them and the rest of the tree goes into firewood and mulch and things like that.”

Environmentally, planting trees has helped to reduce the eutrophication problems of the Kalgan River and Oyster Harbour. The tree roots and decreased grass area have resulted in virtually no run-off, unless there are exceptionally heavy rains. Having less sheep has also been beneficial.

The trees have also helped curb the winds that previously came through, contributing to erosion.

“We still get a bit of wind, but through the whole paddock nothing really blows now because of the trees. Before, in the autumn, strong winds could make the paddock look like a beach.”

Economically the Whittens have been very pleased with their first tree harvest. In 1997 they decided to place 100 ha with the tree prospectus company for cash flow, as their decreasing stock meant lower income. However, most of the trees they have planted

are their own, unlike most farmers in the region who are working solely under a lease arrangement with the prospectus companies.

“Unfortunately there’s not much integration of farming and trees. There’s only a few around that are privately owned.”

The Whittens believe it was definitely a good long term decision to commence planting trees for commercial use. At the time of first planting they were “just hoping for the best” and as it has turned out – both environmentally and financially – the best of both has really come off.

## The Whittens’ Keys to Successful Tree Planting

- identify environmental and economic benefits
- commence as a long term enterprise
- select the right tree species for identified markets
- use a prospectus company if appropriate
- join a landcare group to share advice and ideas

*For more case studies about farmers involved in agroforestry see RIRDC’s publications:*

*Practical Farm Forestry – whole farm case studies (1999)*



◀◀ Kay and Jim Whitem of WA have bravely journeyed with sweet success into commercial tree farming