



The amazing

GRASS

Could this be the answer for our drought-stricken farmers?

Stark photographs of barren landscapes with the sun beating down on starving cattle could become an image of the past.

The answer to Aussie graziers' prayers may have arrived in the form of a "grass" machine.

The revolutionary machine produces around 1.2 tonnes of fodder a day - that's enough feed to keep about 125 steers a day, or around 1200 sheep.

Aimed at battling drought and flood, the simple invention by a NSW farmer has become the basis of a national drought strategy proposal.

The "grass" machine, marketed as the Fodder Factory, is a hydroponic fodder-growing unit, and sells for around \$45,000 per unit. It works by placing dry grain into plastic trays on galvanised steel shelves inside a plastic-cov-

ered, shed-like building. The temperature is controlled and nutrient-rich water fed to the trays at regular intervals.

Within eight days it produces 200 to 250mm of green feed with a mass of edible roots.

Fodder Factory inventors Peter and Sue Ryan have sold 25 of the units in NSW, Queensland, Tasmania and Malaysia. Strong interest has also come from Greece, Turkey and Armenia.

Farming 200ha on the NSW mid-north coast in Bobin, Peter and Sue began looking for solutions to their fodder problems in the 1980s.

"We did some pioneering work and produced some expensive livestock," Peter says. "Then we had the problem of how to feed them and that's how this idea came about."

'This could be an enormous breakthrough'

'Like another set of hands'

Roger and Diana Owen say they're up to their navels in feed after introducing a Fodder Factory to their 1600ha sheep and cattle farm at Albert, 200km west of Dubbo, NSW.

"We have that much feed here," says Roger, "and it's taken a long time before I could say that."

Roger, who bought into the property six years ago, recalls the problem of trying to finish stock when at crucial times the feed would disappear. "It was always when you needed it most," he says.

"We took the plunge and invested in the Fodder Factory. At \$45,000 we were worried about the capital outlay, but after seeing one in operation we had no doubt it would well and truly cover its cost."

Roger says the factory is making an enormous difference. "It jacks up your confidence no end because you say, 'Yes, I can do that and I don't have to worry about feed'. You get to rely on it like another set of hands."



The Owens inside their Fodder Factory.

"We put the fodder factory in and we suddenly had a tonne of green feed every day for the rest of our lives. That operation can transform your farm instantly.

"In October last year we sold off half of our cattle for top dollars. They were fat because of the fodder factory.

"We later sold the other half in the same condition receiving \$300 a head for what we sold.

"As the dry weather got worse we started to buy back because we were confident - regardless of the weather - we could feed them. We were buying beautiful Murray Grey cattle for \$85 a head."

Peter says the business now occupies most of his time.

"People put in the cement slab and I go and erect the factory. After we built the prototype in 1989 news spread by word of mouth.

Peter says most farmers were broke after the troubled '90s and the Government had provided only band-aid measures.

"They should be asking how we can drought-proof Australia," he says.

"People in the city tend to say farmers are always whingeing

and complaining, but the price of cattle has virtually halved the past two years.

"If an office worker was told, 'We are going to cut your wage in half', they'd get up and leave.

"What are we going to do with farmers, just say, 'See you later', or do we do something to assist?"

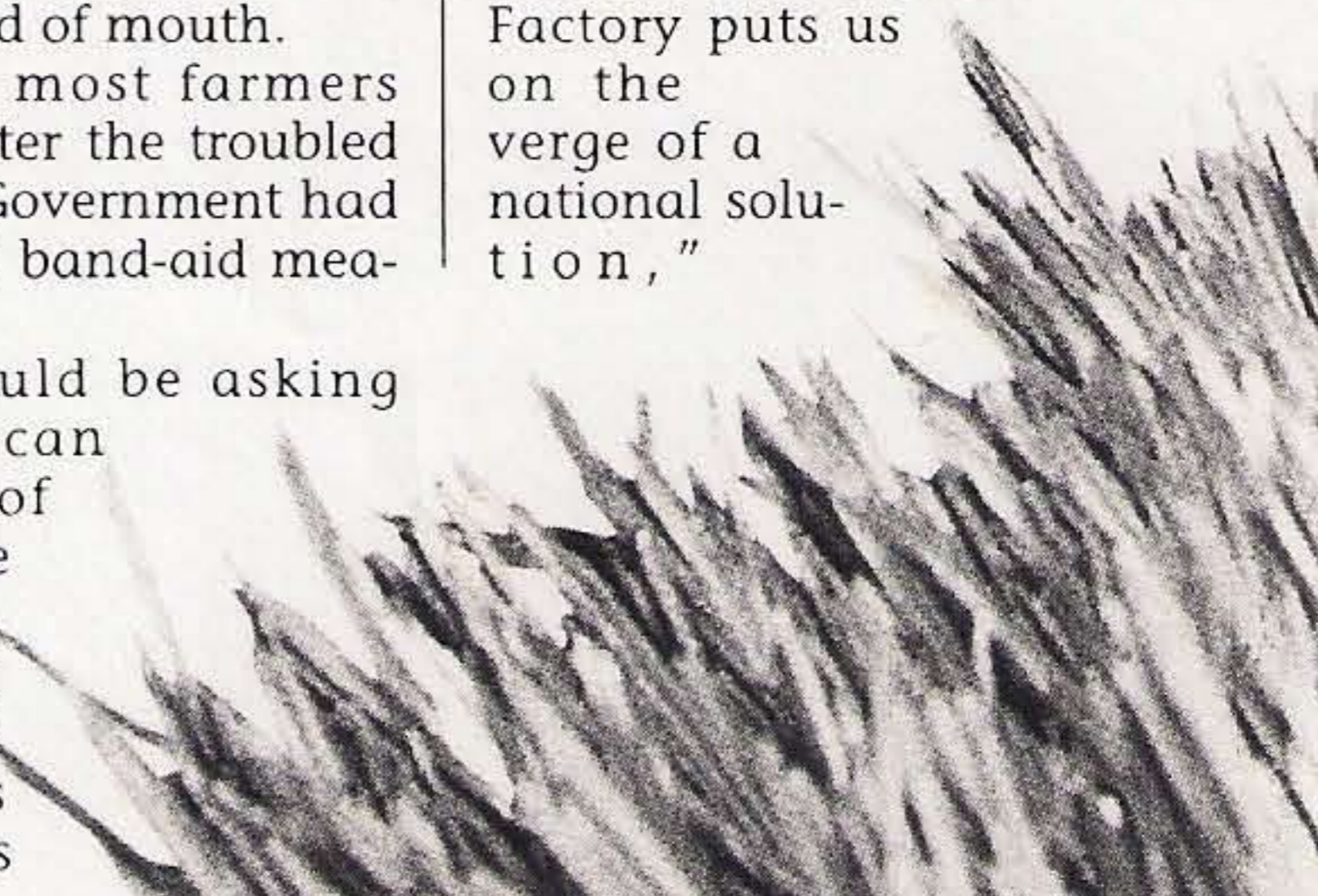
'We are on the verge of a national solution'

The Federal Shadow Minister for Primary Industry, Neil O'Keefe, is so taken by the Fodder Factory he wants it used as the basis of

a national strategy to fight drought.

Mr O'Keefe says the fodder factories could be placed in strategic areas across Australia and mobilised in times of drought or flood.

"Providing the science and economics stack up, and the evidence is that they do, then I think the Fodder Factory puts us on the verge of a national solution,"

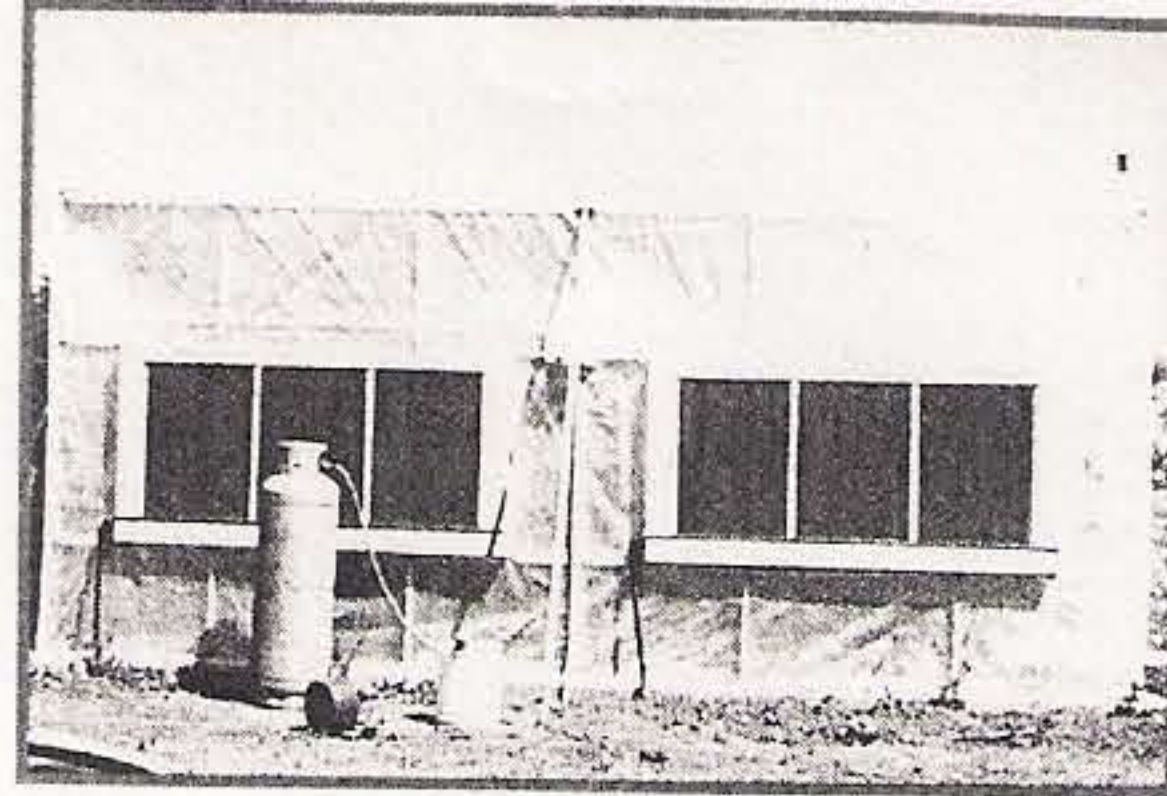




No more feed worries. It has paid off for Diana Owen

Waste not, want not

At his Rainbow Valley Game Farm outside Canberra, Tony Cairnes is operating a Fodder Factory using the waste water from his trout farm.



Tony bought the property 14 years ago. He developed a small-scale commercial trout farm and runs 300 red deer and cattle. "Because of shortages of feed related to periods of drought and bad seasons I saw it as an adjunct to finishing stock prior to market," he says.

"Situations in recent years with prolonged dry periods and drought have forced all graziers to resort to fallback means of feeding their stock and that's always costly.

"Even though you are feeding the animals to keep them alive, you are not getting a return for the product at the end."

Tony says the factory is using waste water from the trout ponds which previously was pumped on to adjacent paddocks.

"To sprout the grain you have to use a prepared nutrient bought from a supplier, but we felt we would serve two purposes by using the water from the trout farm."

MACHINE

Mr O'Keefe says.

He says the factory would help reduce the \$40 million a year being spent by the Federal Government on income support for struggling farmers.

Mr O'Keefe says he's working on plans for a fodder trial.

"It would probably mean the Federal Government going into partnership with local councils and agricultural colleges to set up the factories and find funding for a trial.

"If it proves effective I'll bring forward a plan to have them placed as a large-scale emergency response."



The totally Australian-made Fodder Factory has been selected for inclusion as one of 36 businesses in the Australian Technology Showcase for the 2000 Olympics.

Australian Fodder Industry Association chairman Colin Simpson says the concept has enormous potential.

"I can't see it will drought-proof the country, but it will help," he says.

"The concept is good, and research and development into this area would be well worthwhile."

Belinda Watson



Peter Ryan at work.

Tony Cairnes and the grass that helps protect farms against drought.