

# RURAL

## Gillian's natural selection

Gillian Sanbrook has cast a healing hand over her 950-hectare property in the Wymah Valley.

In just over a decade the once bare and barren 'Bibbaringa' is flourishing thanks to her application of holistic management principles.

The feed is lush, the cattle are fat, the birds are singing and Gillian is now reaping the rewards of her vision splendid.



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**VISION SPLENDID:** Gillian Sanbrook can look out over the fruits of her labour at 'Bibbaringa', near Bowna. **Picture: MARK JESSER**

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# Place where still waters run deep

BY JODIE O'SULLIVAN

IT'S damp underfoot at Bibbaringa.

There are lush pockets of tree-lined green as far as the eye can see across the 950-hectare property in the Wymah Valley.

Closer inspection reveals delightful little billabongs, thick with native grasses and the odd glimpse of cattle grazing contentedly amongst the foliage.

It's a delightful oasis; almost impossible to imagine as across Australia the land bears the brutal battle scars of one of the driest periods in our history.

And it's as if the birds, too, are singing the praises of the transformation Gillian Sanbrook has brought about in the once-bare landscape in little more than a decade.

At 63, Gillian is bursting with energy and the enthusiasm for her vision is, quite simply, infectious.

Traipsing across paddocks, she's pointing out in quick succession the jewels in the crown of her vision splendid.

There's long lines of contour banks (more on that later), the 70,000 trees she's planted, stands of native water grass - "it's significant on a statewide scale" - and the ground cover.

The property is currently running about 450 steers that will be sold shortly before Gillian de-stocks for the dry, summer months.

She bends down and runs the wet earth through her fingers.

Ah, the soil.

"I love black soil," she declares.

When Gillian and her then husband David Taylor purchased Bibbaringa in 2007 it was in a sorry state.

While the property had "good bones", the land was degraded, overgrazed, and suffering from serious gully erosion.

When it did rain, any goodness in the ground simply poured off the slopes.

Photographs in Gillian's office from February 2007 reveal a barren moonscape.

The property is almost unrecognisable to the view we're enjoying from the homestead's breeze-way today.

The couple sought to put in place the holistic management practices they'd learned through some hard lessons operating their successful Pooginook Merino stud in the Riverina.

"We went through the whole drought, debt, wool depression thing in the early 90s," she recalls.

"We looked for a different way; it's when most people make change and you tap into all your survival skills."

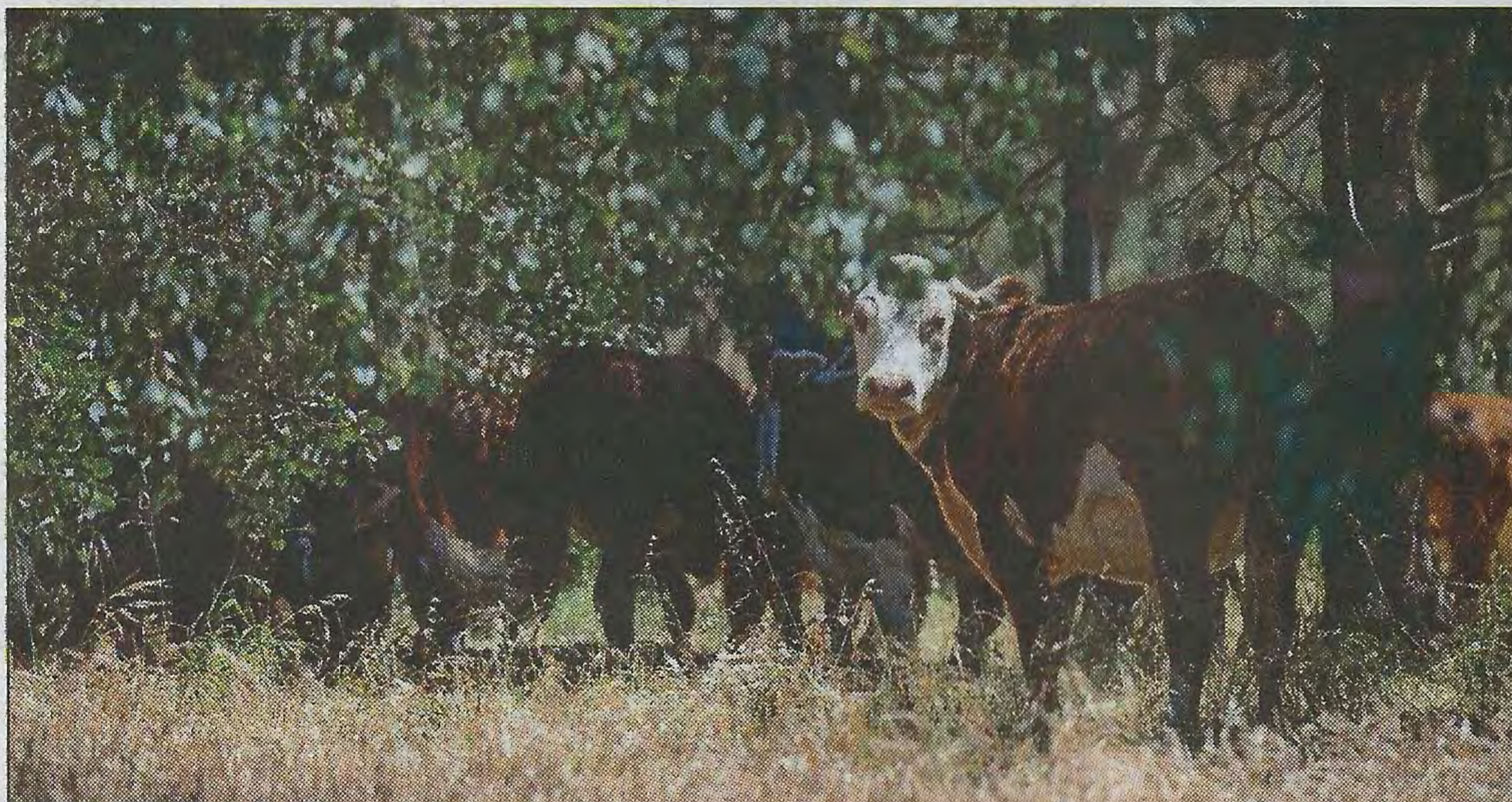
Bibbaringa needed a rest - it needed time to heal, Gillian says.

That can be counter-intuitive for farmers who traditionally purchase land for production - and profit.

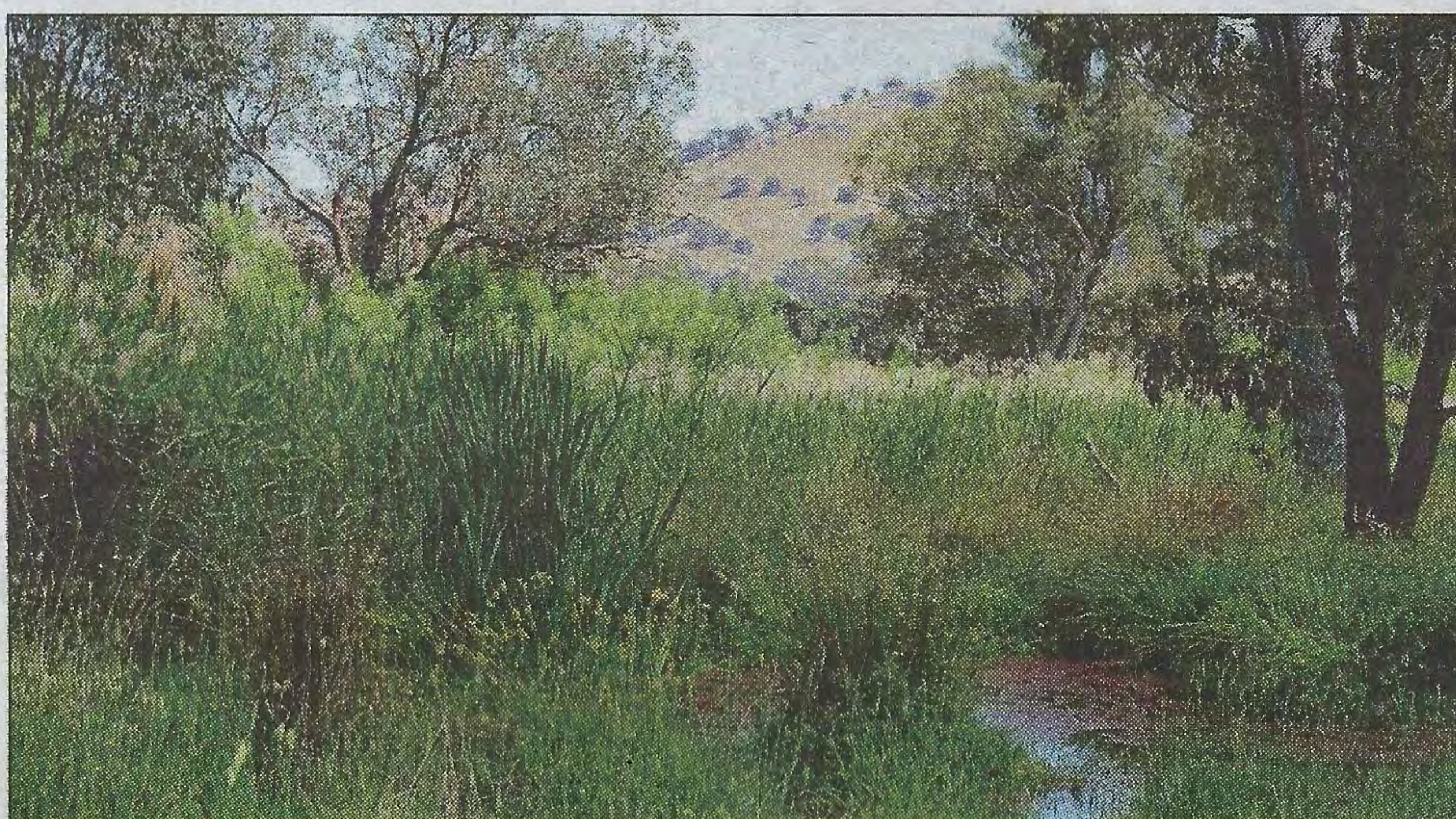
But the priority has never been about production at all costs for Gillian.

"I believe people put a lot of pressure on nature and their farming business in order to live the life their forefathers lived ... we need to change our mindset," she reflects.

"We are living in variable climate change times and



**WORTH THE WEIGHT:** These steers, now at over 500 kilograms, will be sold shortly before Gillian de-stocks for the summer months.



**NO DRY ARGUMENT:** A little wet oasis at Bibbaringa - the aim always is to slow the flow of water across the landscape. **PICTURES: MARK JESSER**

there are so many costs now associated with a farming business."

Rainfall is no longer reliable, even on the mighty south-west slopes.

"Coming here, we expected reliable rainfall of 750mm but we're getting between 400mm and even up to a metre one year," Gillian says.

"With that variability you have to re-plan.

"We were living with 350mm rainfall in the Riverina and when things looked like getting tough, we had to react."

At Bibbaringa Gillian set about casting her healing hands over the land with the focus on nursing the soil and land back to health.

"We started with an aerial photograph and made a plan about how we wanted the

place to look in 100 years," she says.

Paramount was slowing the flow of water across the landscape.

It's based on the principles of natural sequence farming and the work of Gillian's revered mentor Peter Andrews. That's where the contour banks come in.

Across one section of the hilly property there

are two kilometres of the dirt mounds.

"They hold water so that it moves laterally across the ground and the spaced overflow points allow the water to fan out across the land," she explains.

"In Australia we have adopted a drainage mentality - we need to get the water running back through the landscape.

That's where the trees (the aim is to have at least 25 per cent of the property planted to trees), native grasses and mini wetlands come in.

Ground cover is Gillian's mantra.





**IT'S ONLY NATURAL:** Gillian Sanbrook walks among the phragmites, a native water plant often found in wetland areas - "they used to burn it".

And we're talking 100 per cent ground cover.

To that end she uses a rotational grazing plan to manage and move the mob - she runs the cattle together and they are never in a paddock more than four or five days.

She's more than tripled the number of paddocks on the property to 63.

And now we get to the pointy end of this not-so-dry argument.

Gillian does not buy in feed and she de-stocks for the summer months religiously every year come November.

Then in March and April she researches and makes

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I'm in awe of nature - yet we think we can control it. I believe people put a lot of pressure on nature and their farming business in order to live the life their forefathers lived ... we need to change our mindset.

One day the world may put an equal value on natural capital or environmental wealth as it does financial wealth.

**Gillian Sanbrook**

a call about stock numbers based on climate forecasts, advice from a trusted group of like-minded colleagues

and her own well-honed gut instincts.

Then she heads off to the high country and Riverina

cattle sales and buys in steers and heifers depending on price and the season.

"I'll buy weaners at be-

tween 260 and 280 kilograms or a bit heavier if it looks like a dry year and they'll be sold at about 550 kilograms."

She originally had a breeding operation but changed to finishing in the past two seasons.

"It is profitable because the costs of production are so low," Gillian says.

"In 2017 the cost per kilogram of beef was about 58 cents per kilo."

Gillians is reluctant to describe what she does as drought-proofing.

"I'm managing for dry times," she states.

"I'm in awe of nature - yet

we think we can control it.

"There is so much we are learning about relationships with soil ecology.

"It is not all about being economically viable in agriculture but building natural capital - building soil organic matter, soil carbon, soil fertility and biology."

Gillian likens her work to an artist's canvas.

"I think when you are a farmer, you have to be quite creative," she says.

"I feel like I'm expressing my creativity through making this vision for the landscape a reality.

"One day the world may put an equal value on natural capital or environmental wealth as it does financial wealth.

"Really, the two go hand in hand with social capital as well.

"I think regenerative agriculture is mindful of all three."

It hasn't been all smooth sailing and when the going got tough it was her children that urged her to keep going.

Sons Douglas Taylor, 29, and Rowand Taylor, 27, challenged her on everything and pushed her to keep going with her vision for a better future for the land.

It's knowledge she's now actively sharing with several groups both in the Holbrook region and further afield in start-up pods at Nagambie, Coleambally and a second locally.

A well-established group of nine meets every six weeks for information-sharing, trouble-shooting and just a robust exchange of ideas and opinions.

"We have about 6000 to 7000 cattle in the Holbrook group," Gillian says.

"There is a quiet regenerative revolution going on - it's ticking away and gaining momentum.

"We need to question industrial farming and the industrial purchasing of food. The cheapest and healthiest way to feed your family is from your own back garden and on grass-fed meat."