

Using Chickens with Cattle with Andrew Cameron Episode 6

Transcription:

Daniel: Daniel O'Brien here, welcome back to greengrassseggfarming.com. My special guest today is Andrew Cameron from Byron Grass Fed. Welcome.

Andrew: Thanks Daniel, thanks for getting me on here.

Daniel: Yeah no worries, so today we going to be talking about using chickens with cattle and you've had a little bit of experience with this Andrew. I want to start with, why would someone, if they've currently got cattle, want to bring chickens to the mix?

Andrew: Yeah, I was using cattle as much as possible with the chickens for a good couple of years in the last time I was managing Possum Creek. Originally, you're thinking about biodiversity, I am too, especially with creating more diversity, biodiversity in your soils to start with, so I mean the cow manure is full of great nutrients which the chickens then very happily spread around, which is great. Not only that you've got all the fly larvae in there and that's what they're pecking at. You just see, everytime I've moved the chickens into a patch where the cattle have been, they just go straight to the cow pats and there's obviously a lot of feed in there that they want, so that's great for them and I think it just comes back to the whole holistic view of it all, that you're creating that biodiversity in the system.

You're seeing nature at work and aside from that they are a great tool to help graze down your grass before bringing your chickens in. I know I've had a lot of issues bringing chooks in to the paddock when it's too long, you can lose the eggs or they get comfortable in certain areas that you don't want them to. Sometimes you can't always get the cattle in front of the chooks as much as you like to, they're on a very different schedule. Another great bonus is that, you're not going to be slashing paddocks as much, before you bring chooks in. It's a great tool to use in the mix of things and also gives added income to the farm so it's not just biodiversity it's diversity in your own farm enterprise, in the whole system. You've got diversity on the ground, and in your pocket, I suppose.

Daniel: So tell me, what benefits have you seen, let's just say we're talking about a farm, they've just got cattle, they might be doing a cell grazing technique so they putting them in a small area for a day or two and moving them on versus adding chickens to it. Do you think you can see a noticeable difference where the chickens have followed the cattle, in farms that you've managed?

Andrew: I think the main noticeable difference too, you see that it's working, you see the chickens really enjoy scratching that manure. To me that's just a sure sign from nature that it's supposed to happen that way. The first thing they'll go for will be cow pats. It's great to look over the paddock and see, what used to be cow pats, just scratched out areas, you can see they've spread the manure, you can see that they're gone in there, they've got whatever it is that they are looking for in there. Obviously it's a tell tale sign that it's supposed to be working that way.

Daniel: One thing that I found interesting is how far they spread them, you think that they'd just spread it out a bit, it's almost like a metre square, its fully annihilated, it's spread right across. Just for pasture, having that cow pat rather than being just a dinner plate, it's spread over a metre and you got chickens doing that, as opposed to trying to do it yourself.

Andrew: Absolutely, and that's the thing that brings it right down, I guess we're used to seeing these lumpy paddocks because of those large deposits of cow pats. I guess you're getting a better cover of your pasture in a sense because of that fertilisation spreading. You're getting that more even spread and it just makes a lot of sense, you probably don't need one huge cow pat for that small area.

Daniel: Yeah that's right. One thing that you did touch on which I think is a real benefit, is that the cattle can eat the grass down before the chooks come. Typically chooks don't want to go into grass that is taller than them, like I think, even you or I, we don't want to walk through a field of grass that we can't see through. I found chooks go so much better when the grass is ankle height or even shorter, they can really get into it and see more. Having the cows in front to eat the grass down. Which leads me onto, how does this work? What does it look like? You've got some cattle, you've got a couple of hundred chooks on your farm. What does it look like to use them together, because as you were saying before, the cattle will naturally move a lot faster than chickens unless you only have one or two. So how does it work?

Andrew: Yeah that's something you know, obviously I don't claim to be an expert on the matter yet. That's the ideal dream, is having them moving right in front of the chooks as much as possible but unfortunately in reality it's very hard to time things, because the cattle are moving faster. A lot of it comes down to the planning stage and I definitely have nailed the numbers in terms of how many cattle will run best with how many chickens. That's the thing too, quite often it comes down to, we need to produce X amount of chickens to get X amount of eggs to make income for the enterprise and you complement that with the cattle. I think maybe in the design process it would've been more working out what's an ideal number of cows and how fast would they move in front of the chooks and so forth. The new farm, I'm just starting up another farm in Byron, and we'll run three flocks there and at the moment there's only ten head of cattle and we're yet to plan the fences.

It's gonna be a good opportunity there to see how I can incorporate it so that we can maximise that cow and chicken synergy, because it's a bit different especially when you

are moving that one cell, where it might be 450 metre nets or what not. Moving that weekly and then obviously the cattle need a lot more grass than that, unless you have two or three head of cattle. That's the other thing too is, maybe, I've been thinking a lot about designing paddocks in a way that you've got a much larger paddock. It might be two to three hectares that's electrified and running the chooks behind that. Cause then you can move them a lot more regularly too.

I think it comes down to the time it takes to move the whole cell, the whole caravan, rather than you're just jumping in towing your caravan around. There might be more opportunity to create more of that effect because obviously that effect is good, that effect is great with cow manure for chickens. You can see that they wanna eat what's in there, you can see that they enjoy spreading it around and you can see that the pasture enjoys it. I'm trying to work all those little things out but it's a good little thing to keep working on I guess, to try to figure out those optimum ways but in reality it's hard to follow the chickens a lot, frequently, behind the cows.

Daniel: And the thing is every farm is going to be different, it's going to be different shaped landscape and also your rest and recovery time. You're working with farms at Byron Bay so you've got reasonable rainfall, reasonable climate. You're not crazy hot, you're not crazy cold. What sort of rest time, so, the cattle have been through, a few days later the chooks have been through, what sort of rest time do you allow in your climate before you bring the cattle or the chickens back over that patch of ground.

Andrew: Yeah, that's the other thing too, that's going to differ a lot between the cattle and the chickens. So for our cattle, in a growing season, we'll give it a recovery period from anywhere from six to 14 weeks and then over the non-growing period it's a lot different, because you can't essentially overgraze in a non-growing period, so I manage it a bit differently. So yeah, there's the seasons and the climates. You have to change the grazing periods and that's influencing with the chickens given that it is, with the system I've been running with anyway. Yeah, as they've said there's many different ways people are doing it, so it's great to explore those. They find the chickens will end up being more a week to week thing, grass isn't their primary feed in that sense too. It's an additional thing to the feed that you have to give them, and so they're not smashing it down as bad as the cattle would do, but even with the chickens though, I like to see at least eight weeks of recovery in a growing season and even up to 12 weeks over the winter periods for the chooks.

Daniel: Tell me about the benefits. If someone is starting out and they think, "Well why couldn't I just take them back after four weeks, the grass looks high, looks green". What's gonna happen if you keep doing that?

Andrew: Well, I mean you'll just see you'll just get a nitrogen overload for one thing and again it's just monitoring. One of the big issues I've found is if the caravan stays in the one spot for the whole week, which it has pretty much ended up being, because it's a lot of time to go in and move it, I think if you're moving it everyday you could shorten your

recovery period but you can see a bit more of a hot nitrogen build up than you probably want to have in there.

I think too for cleanliness, I mean three weeks I guess is an essential parasite cycle that you want to break, so three weeks minimum. But I mean like anything you just don't want to overdo the pasture because there are certain patches where the caravan has been you can see it's had a much more high impact. I have noticed succession taking a back seat a little bit, I suppose, in terms of there'll be a patch of weeds, which is fine like it's still a part of nature it creates more diversity and so forth but you can see that, ok that area probably had a bit too much.

Daniel: So you've left the chickens there too long and you're finding weeds are coming up rather than good quality pasture.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. It's just because it's had a higher impact I suppose.

Daniel: And that's something else with different climates. I know a farm that's probably four or five hours south of Byron, still north of Sydney and they'll use a 50 by 50 metre square. They'll have their chooks in there for three days but they'll move the caravan inside that square so the [chicken caravan](#) is only sitting in one spot each night. Each night it's in a different spot, and then they'll move on. But again, different seasons – in some seasons when you've got high growth you've got to be able to treat your farm a lot different, to whether it's middle of winter and low growth.

Andrew: Yeah, that's the ideal thing is to be able to get in there and move it daily, and that's why sometimes I think to go to bigger paddocks and move them more. It's just working out how much input you give the system, to how much you can produce from it in a sense.

Daniel: So when you talked before about parasites, have you found having chickens, if it's reduced the amount of ticks and things that are hanging around the cattle?

Andrew: Not as much, I mean, no, not necessarily.

Daniel: Yeah I realise that it's not something that you can measure, this week or that week.

Andrew: Yeah, I haven't noticed a change in that as much, and I think that's just mainly just because they are on such a different timing with the grazing and again I think in the system we are building it was sort of, ok, we are building chickens and cattle and then oh, you really want to focus on the chickens to build up the eggs so then the cattle become a bonus thing. Every time we get them in it's a bonus, but they'll be moving totally different thing. That's why, yeah I think if we're planning it more synergistically, you would think more closely on what number of cattle would run better with X amount of chickens.

That's something I'm looking into for this next one, given it's a blank canvas at this stage. I'm looking a bit more – and I guess more of a polyculture thinking-rather than we have been going really gung-ho on eggs and we're throwing in the cattle as a bonus. But it is a great bonus to have either way. Just create that biodiversity when you can, if you have cattle there just start thinking about fencing, that you can bring in, just do it from time to time when it makes sense or when you're able.

Daniel: Yeah and the other thing with the planning – I know you and I've talked about this in the past. A lot of it's observation. You can put as much plan as you want onto paper but then when you get out in the paddock and you go “well, hang on, it worked different on paper” and working with the seasons it's like, if you've just bought a farm yesterday, don't fill it up tomorrow. Just wait around a bit, see what happens, see where the wet spots are. A bit of observation. And it's not something you ever get to the end of, like, I've done my observation. It's just constant. So I think that's something where someone can get started with chickens and see how they go. It's not a case of don't get started, or don't get cattle. Get them, work them together, and see what's working for your farm and such.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely that's the thing in planning isn't it, yeah you plan to change the plan always, that's the constant thing about it, that's just it. There isn't any model that can go right “this is how it's done”. It's always different. I'm on a new patch of land at the moment, it's gonna be different again in terms of how it responds to chickens and cattle where I bring sheep in there too which is great.

I only just started using sheep, grazing before the chickens. It's a totally different thing because now we've actually got the right number of sheep that can spend a week in the same cell size as the chickens and it's enough feed. But again that's this time of year when it's knee high, growing like mad, so that's going to change again as well. I don't think you get as much interaction with the chickens, their manure is a lot different to cow pats, so we'll just see how that goes too, it but it's another tool to use in that creating biodiversity and diversity in your farm in terms of what you can produce and everything else.

Daniel: Yeah ok, so to get down to some of the how. So, I know you've used the [electric chicken fencing](#), the chooks are inside that, so when you are talking about the sheep you said you've got the right number of sheep for the same size cell, what cell size are you referring to?

Andrew: At the moment I'm just running for 300 hens running 350 metre of the feather nets which is electrified. That's the same thing we use for the sheep, that's electrified as well, which is working for that number quite well. I think we'll move that to 400 hens and increase the cell size again so 50 by 50 which again is going to be better for the sheep during the non-growing season too. A bit more space because we can see, they can handle what it is now but there's a lot of growth, there's a lot of feed too.

Daniel: How've you found the cattle with the [electric chicken fence](#), obviously you got chooks one side and at times you've got cattle the other side, how have you found them respond, full grown cows and calves and such?

Andrew: Yeah, they can sometimes be an issue because they will want to rub up on the fences from time to time. So generally I'll try and make it so that the chicken cell is not in the paddock of the cows. Again it's depending on the type of cow and what behaviour is going on, I mean there's been periods where it's been fine and all of a sudden a calf decides to challenge or whatever.

Daniel: And that's the same experience I've had, like when you put them on a dairy farm, the dairy cows just look at it and go "I don't really need to go near that". I've seen, specially young cows and the calves, they're always that little bit more inquisitive, so yeah, they might want to touch it or rub up against it or something. It's probably a good tip for anyone that if you've got calves around, just keep an eye on them around your fences, maybe put a tape up or in another paddock while the chooks are grazing through there.

Andrew: Yeah, because that's the tricky thing too I guess. With the cattle I usually run in the pigtails with a single string electrified and the calves can pretty much go wherever they want. I think in some ways it's better to have certain paddocks or keep them away from the chickens even during the weaning time. And they're much smaller and so forth and once they're responding to that single line better, they will be much more manageable but again if you're bringing in steers and fattening them out its gonna be a lot more manageable as well. I think it's something to consider too if you gonna be breeding and running chickens, there's a whole little step that you gonna have to manage I guess. But obviously it'll be a lot easier if you are just bringing in steers, fattening them out, it will be a lot easier to incorporate that into the mix.

Daniel: Yeah and a lot of farms, if you are breeding, you've got more than one paddock anyway, it comes down to each individual farm set up, but as long as you've got a variety of paddocks to work with, you can just keep the young stock away from where the chickens are grazing at that time. We'll just do a little bit of a recap, so, if you've got cows, some of the benefits are they spread the cow pats, where this provides protein food for the chickens because they're going to get heaps of bugs in there out of that, they're gonna spread that out so that's gonna be better for your pasture. Make sure you keep moving your [chicken caravan](#) or your movable chicken shed regularly so that you don't get a nitrogen build up. Your rest time could be between six and 14 weeks but even that depends on the season. A lot of it just comes down to the planning of your farm and observation to seeing what's working or what's not and, as you said, plan to change the plan.

Andrew: Yeah and having a paddock up your sleeve I think, last time we really loaded up like, alright, great I've got minimum 12 weeks recovery; take the whole property going right, we can fit everything, we can do that but I think it's wise to have a paddock up your sleeve that you can rest it or hot rest your entire area, again, based on that observation, look we don't want to run just relying on that recovery period because things are gonna

change. I think it's easy to get caught on that and go, "Right, so if I've got 100 acres I can fit this many chickens based on that recovery period" but I think it's wise to keep some space up your sleeve for sure.

Daniel: Ok, keep a spare paddock that's a good one to note down. Is there anything else that we've missed? We've gone over some of the main points. What's some advice or some action steps for someone who's got a couple of hundred acres, they've got some cows, they're going to add chickens to the mix, they've got enough space to keep them separately, what are some of the first steps, to start getting the chickens to follow the cows, that they should look at.

Andrew: Well I think yeah, originally you're gonna have to look at how the cow paddocks are set up. I mean it wouldn't be hard just to get a real electric single string wire and some pigtailed and just start the process I think depending on how the paddocks are set up. It's very easy just to draw a few paddocks, get the cows in there, get them trained on the fence on the wire and just graze it down a bit and then let them out again or bring them in when you need to I suppose. It totally depends on, how the set up is, but I think if you've got some of that wire around, the good thing is too, with the caravans you can just close them up and let them follow, you know. If you've already got cattle, incorporate the chickens into how the cattle are grazing rather than think, "Ok this is now a chicken farm, move the cattle with the chickens" or vice-versa.

Daniel: Ok no, that's a good tip to look at.

Andrew: But yeah I guess it's just about getting into it, start doing, start observing and see what happens.

Daniel: Yeah I think observation is a big take away today and something you can't do too much of. Just overtime, just continually going, what's working and is it still working like it did last season and what's it going to look like.

Andrew: Yeah, those things will evolve in these areas which will start the chain and that's great, I mean I've noticed certain paddocks on certain slopes, kikuyu will come through which is the favourable pasture we're going for, you would think, why is it working there not on the others, they've had the same impact so, you know, it's a constant problem solving thing I think.

Daniel: Yeah, always moving, always changing. Well, thank you very much for your time today I'm sure everyone has really benefited from some of the experience and wisdom that you've shared and I look forward on catching up with you in the future and hearing about how the chickens are working with the sheep and how it's working with the cell system. Awesome, well thanks for your time today.