## ROUND UP

FRIDA FEEDB





with RAY MARTIN

## CRYSTAL CLEAR IDEA

"ratbag", in the best Aussie sense of the word. In fact, seeing it's January, I nominate Peter Andrews as Australian of the Year. (They'll probably choose a judge or a sports star instead.)

Peter would be perfect, given the long, agonisingly dry months and the clarion call to "drought-proof" Australia – whatever that means.

How do you "drought-proof" the driest continent on earth? (Outside of Antarctica.) How dopey. I guess what Bob Mansfield, the Telstra Boss, meant when he made the hair-brained suggestion at the Farm Hand Appeal launch, was that we need to start making some radical changes in water policy. Or else.

Look at the Darling River, gasping for life, and it makes you wonder. Let's hope it's not too late.

Peter Andrews knows that yapping about "drought-proofing" Australia is nonsense. It's never going to happen.

Peter hails from a little "blink of the eye" called Bylong – just the other side of Mudgee. He's been breeding champion racehorses near Bylong for almost a quarter of a century.

Like so much of Australia, they've got the worst drought in living memory up the Bylong Valley. Everyone is spraying precious water from the diminishing aquifers, hand feeding cattle on stony paddocks and praying for rain.

Except on Peter Andrews 600ha spread.

He's got lush, green grass right across his flood plain. His cattle are fat and plump; the yearlings all frisky like the thoroughbreds he's raised here.

If the old saying "you are what you eat" is true, then Peter Andrews' stock must be eating some magic elixir. They look fantastic.

When it comes to farming, Peter is an absolute revolutionary — even a heretic. There's a touch of the David Suzuki genius about Peter.

He's bulldozed the steep riverbanks, getting rid of the erosion that characterises our waterways. He's planted reeds, bushes and willows to jam up the river's flow.

Over recent years the NSW government has

spent more than \$150million doing the opposite – cleaning out rivers so they can rush to the sea, taking topsoil and nutrients with them. Why?

Peter argues that a free-flowing river in our country is not a healthy stream. Australia's water system, as the earliest explorers wrote in their diaries, was a series of billabongs and reedy lagoons.

Peter Andrews has slowed up the Bylong River, forcing it underground in places, storing it in "green dams", away from the scorching noon sun.

While Peter's neighbours up-river and below are all dry and dusty, he has shady pools, with birds, insects, frogs and even fish. He's created an eco-system, with water as pure as Sydney drinks, without the chlorine.

Indeed, Peter uses no chemicals on his property. At all. Nor does he have the cost of sprays. Doesn't need them.

The European willows, planted to hold the riverbanks during wet seasons, are already being pushed aside by the native gums that grow more slowly, but are much tougher.

His logic is as crystalline clear as his water. A month or so ago, I walked around Peter Andrews' property with John Anderson, the Deputy Prime Minister. He's a drought-ridden farmer from Gunnedah.

John Anderson shook his head, as his R.M. boots disappeared deep in the flood plain grasses. I asked him, as a sceptical cocky, to punch holes in Andrews' heretical farming methods.

The Deputy PM smiled and said he couldn't fault it. He even asked Mr Andrews to come up to Gunnedah and look at his parched farm. I could be wrong, but that seemed little more than a sop for the TV cameras.

Isn't there an urgency? Isn't the bush dying? How long do we have to wait? How much more evidence do they want?

Peter Andrews 25 year "experiment" clearly works. The CSIRO acknowledges that. Peter insiets the same principles would get rivers across Australia flowing again, stronger and sweeter – even the Darling.

But don't hold your breath, Australia.

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