



# Blanncourt Station – productivity and profitability gains through efficient herd management

## Overview

*Blanncourt Station* is owned by Glen and Cheryl Connolly and is situated west of Georgetown in the Queensland Gulf Region. The station is a typical family-run breeding enterprise with 2600 head on 18,753 ha. The average rainfall of Georgetown is 800 mm, falling in the summer monsoons from Dec to March. There are several land types on Blanncourt, with the main being frontage, poor alluvial, red sandy, yellow clay and gravelly ridge.

The family operation runs high grade Brahman cattle and introduces some Charolais bulls into the breeding herd to improve marketing options. These crossbred offspring are not retained for further breeding. Cattle are sold to varying markets, depending on the economic situation at the time. Options include live export, local store market, backgrounding at home and custom feedlotting in Central Queensland to on-sell to Central-Southern Queensland markets.

When purchased, in 1996, *Blanncourt* had been severely overgrazed and both land and cattle condition was poor. Over 15 years, the Connolly family have improved both productivity and profitability through implementing lighter stocking rates, wet season spelling, feeding and/or supplementation programs, cross breeding, and pasture improvements. Successful pasture management, herd management and marketing options have been identified and used to help the family adapt to changing pressures on their beef business.



Cheryl and Glen Connolly

## General operations and property infrastructure

Blanncourt currently has 13 paddocks greater than 200 ha and approximately 30 water points. Distance to water is not an issue with 77% of the property within 2 km of water and 96% within 3 km of water, assuring even pasture utilisation across paddocks. Majority of the remaining areas of the property which are greater than 3 km from water are on yellow clay with low grazing value. Many water points are within water squares and holding paddocks, which assist with mustering cattle.

All labour is currently provided by Glen and Cheryl, contributing two full time equivalents (FTEs) per year to cover the direct cattle management, farm maintenance and administration. Labour is

Table 1. Breeder herd numbers, liveweight gain, greenhouse gas emissions and land condition on Blanncourt Station for 1996 and 2011.

	1996	2011
Breeders	2270	1670
Weaners	1066 (46%)	1103 (66%)
Av annual LW gain (kg/hd)	60–80 kg	140–180 kg
Cow deaths	190	38
Liveweight turnoff (t)	222.6 t	405.7 t
Greenhouse gas emissions	25.1 kg CO <sub>2</sub> e/kg	11.7 kg CO <sub>2</sub> e/kg
Land in A/B condition	15%	85%
<b>Gross margin</b>	<b>93% increase</b>	

brought in for intensive cattle management operations such as mustering and branding. There is little spare labour capacity.

## Herd/grazing management

When purchased in 1996, 15% of *Blanncourt* was in desirable A and B land condition with 2270 cows and heifers producing 1066 weaners each year (46% weaning rate). In response to reduced stocking rates, improved infrastructure, wet season spelling and pasture improvement over the last 15 years, approximately 85% of *Blanncourt* is now running in A and B land condition. Breeder numbers have also been reduced, with 1670 breeders producing 1103 weaners (66% weaning rate) in 2011. The significant improvements over 15 years are:

- 70% increase in country in desirable land condition
- 20% increase in weaning rate
- 33% decrease in breeder numbers.

Under current management cows are mated all year round with two main weaning rounds in May and September for weaning and processing (brand, castrate, dehorn). A third muster is conducted in December to process calves only (no weaners are removed). Little or no access to the southern half of the property across the Gilbert River during the wet season is a limitation to herd management options and often affects timing of the first weaning round.

Each year a wet season spelling program is implemented on the property with areas spelled depending on the season and paddock requirements. Approximately 30% of the property is wet season spelled each year.

In order to boost the live weight gains of weaners and young cattle in the wet season, fertile frontage country has been fenced into smaller paddocks and legumes established in these pastures. Weaner paddocks are spelled over the wet season to ensure fresh paddocks for all newly weaned calves.

**Glen and Cheryl are committed to ensuring that land condition is improved through conservative stocking rates whilst continuing to improve pastures through wet season spelling and the addition of legumes where possible.**

## Supplementation and animal health

Breeders receive a wet season phosphorous supplement and a dry season urea based lick. Breeders on the southern side of the river are sometimes not accessible for long periods during the wet season which can be an impediment to wet season phosphorous feeding. This is overcome by distributing the entire wet season phosphorous requirement in the late dry season into covered lick troughs to avoid spoilage.

Blanncourt grows approximately 800–1200 tonne of sorghum silage each year on 54 ha of Gilbert River alluvial country. The silage is used for backgrounding steers and cull heifers that may be sold on to markets in southern Queensland.

All weaners are fed M8U from June until the start of the wet season. They receive phosphorus lick throughout the wet season, going on to silage in the following dry until they reach 370–400 kilograms. These silage fed cattle are sent to various markets, such as Atherton Tablelands processors or southern feedlots.



*Brahman cows grazing on Blanncourt Station*



*Steers on supplementation at Blanncourt*



*Backgrounding steers on silage*



Improved pasture production, wet season phosphorus supplement, targeted dry season M&U feeding and silage feeding to sale cattle has:

- Increased annual live weight gains from 60–80 kg/head in 1996 to 140–180 kg/head in 2011
- Reduced cow deaths by 80% (190 in 1996 and 38 in 2010)
- Provided greater opportunities for herd selection and female sales
- Significantly increased gross margins.

While supplementation has assisted an increase in greenhouse gas emissions efficiency, it does come at a significant financial cost.

## Greenhouse gas emissions

Greenhouse gas modelling indicates the current herd turns off 405.7 tonnes of liveweight with 11.7 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e/kg of liveweight sold. This compares to the 1996 production system turning off 222.6 tonnes of liveweight with emissions of 25.1 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e/kg of liveweight sold.

Overall, greenhouse gas emissions are down by 15% and greenhouse gas emissions/kg of liveweight sold is halved when compared to 1996. **This shows greatly improved emission efficiencies as a result of lower age of turnoff and improved liveweight gains.**

## Business performance

In response to reduced stocking rates, wet season spelling, feeding programs, cross breeding and pasture improvement over the past 15 years, the family has achieved an **increase in total gross margins of 93%**. Analysis of the business has raised the dilemma that while the relatively costly feeding program has greatly improved productivity and greenhouse gas emissions efficiency, it may impact profitability and requires consideration in future planning.

## For more information or enquiries contact

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