

Case study: Stocking rate management in the Fitzroy Woodlands

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Background

Bon Accord is located 10 kilometres west of Anakie with mainly the brigalow/blackbutt land type. There are patches of silver-leaved ironbark, coolibah floodplains, downs country and lancewood/bendee ridges. About 75% of the property is cleared with buffel pastures established, and regrowth controlled by bladeploughing or Graslan herbicide. The majority of the property has very good land condition. The herd is self replacing and turnoff from the property is mainly EU steers and cull heifers, with some cows and steers going to local markets. Richard has been at Bon Accord since 2000 and one of the first infrastructure developments was to ensure water point distribution meant that cattle did not have to walk more than one kilometre to water. Paddock sizes are 300 to 400 hectares with stock usually concentrated on about half of the property at any one time. Most paddocks receive some wet season spelling particularly the floodplains for the safety of the cattle. Low stocking rates are used, with large reductions in stock numbers during the drought of the early 2000s. Some of the management issues for the property include brigalow regrowth, low ground cover on scalded floodplains and patch grazing.

Stocking rate management

The overall stocking rate is conservative, and usually only varies by around ten per cent. During dry conditions the stock numbers are reduced significantly, and built up gradually after a drought. Good distribution of water points assist with an even grazing distribution. Effective infrastructure allows regular spelling; however the time of spelling does not always coincide with the wet season. Spelling is usually a result of sales, or moving the cattle for convenience so that paddocks receive dry and/or wet season spells. Richard believes the dry season spells are still a benefit, as the early season growth is enhanced.

Total stock numbers are kept fairly constant at long term carrying capacity. However, if conditions become dry in winter, then the older steers, heifers and saleable animals are sold. If



Richard Hawkins on coolibah flats where ground cover is improving on scalds with summer spelling.

conditions remain dry, cull cows are sold in January based on a pregnancy test and cull for age. Further dry conditions will prompt sales of stores, weaner steers and cull heifers until a nucleus breeder herd is remaining. During the drought in 2004 only 40% of the total herd were retained on the property as breeders. Total breeder numbers were retained with another 30% of the total herd going to agistment. By 2007, total cattle numbers on the property had returned to normal. For five years, numbers had been considerably reduced. While there was minimal expenditure on feeding cattle during the drought, there was considerable cost in lost income from selling smaller, unfinished animals earlier than normal. There was reduced income over subsequent years as cattle numbers were built up and turnoff returned to normal levels. However, grazing pressure was not high on the pasture during these drought years and the land condition has benefited.

Summary

Well established infrastructure, together with a conservative stocking rate and a policy of reducing numbers during dry periods allows for a flexible rotational grazing system and the maintenance of good land condition. This management strategy has worked well for Richard and future droughts will be managed similarly.