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Information for rural business in Central Queensland

Spelling strategies for recovery of pasture condition



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Information for rural business in Central Queensland



Welcome to CQ Beef 29

Welcome to the autumn issue of the CQ BEEF feature for 2017.

Hi Everyone,

Severe Tropical Cyclone Debbie has impacted many Queensland grazing businesses, parts of the supply chain and vital infrastructure. The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is committed to assisting industry recover. Key contacts for information and funding assistance are DAF – www.daf.qld.gov.au or 13 25 23, QRAA on www.qraa.qld.gov.au or Freecall 1 800 623 946. The website <http://www.farmerdisastersupport.org.au> is a listing of all support agencies assisting the recovery effort.

In other areas of CQ, producers are dealing with dry conditions. If you've got a nutrition enquiry, want to assess how many stock you can carry over winter or have a look at the economics of different destocking scenarios please contact your local beef extension officer (contacts below).

If you want to see first-hand how others have addressed the big beef industry problems get aboard the Fitzroy tour to the North. We will be visiting Mt Aberdeen Charters Towers, to delve through 23 years of breeder records and discuss how the management has improved breeder performance and business profitability through breeder, weaner and supplementation management as well as Lisgar Droughtmaster stud at Ayr. The tour will be leaving Emerald on May 8 and returns May 11. There is also an upcoming field day at Mt Aberdeen in May.

The Clermont Cattleman's Challenge field day on May 12 will be held at Paringa feedlot this year, near Capella. Come inspect the CCC steers, see how they weigh, tour the feedlot and listen to guest speakers.

Our central Queensland beef extension team includes;

Mick Sullivan, Rockhampton	4843 2623
Matt Brown, Rockhampton	4843 2611
Kylie Hopkins, Rockhampton	4843 2615
Jim Fletcher, Mackay	4967 0731
Lauren Williams, Mackay	4967 0732
Jo Gangemi, Biloela	4808 6878
Carly Johnstone, Biloela	4808 6887
Byrony Daniels, Emerald	4991 0867

Beef industry takes drought by the horns

One month since the introduction of the Australian Government's Drought Assistance Concessional Loans, the beef industry is leading the herd and taking advantage of the savings the loans provide – accounting for more than 76 per cent of applications received by QRAA.

The new loans, introduced on November 1, 2016, provide multi-purpose finance to restructure debt, cover operating costs, recover from drought and improve future resilience. Loans of up to \$1 million are available, with a concessional interest rate of just 2.47 per cent.

"This new loan program provides some welcome breathing space for producers – it makes smart business sense whether you're refinancing existing debt or restocking once conditions have improved," QRAA chief executive officer Cameron MacMillan said.

"The beef industry's uptake of the program has been extremely encouraging and we applaud graziers for taking the initiative and securing the future of their operations."

For the beef industry, a key appeal is the ability to use the loan to restock, building herd numbers back up to capitalise on improved cattle prices.

"For producers who destocked during the worst of the drought, current prices may be seen as a disheartening hurdle rather than an opportunity," Mr MacMillan said.

"But these loans can reduce the financial pressure at sale time, providing 10 year loan terms at an incredibly low interest rate, including the added bonus of the initial five years interest only."

Applications for Drought Assistance Concessional Loans close 30 June 2017. Producers are urged not to self-assess, and instead call one of QRAA's eight regional area managers who can meet on farm to discuss a producer's individual situations, options and the application process.

For further information visit www.qraa.qld.gov.au or contact QRAA on Freecall 1800 623 946.

DAF welcomes Jane Tincknell to Longreach

After growing up on a mixed farming (beef, wool and fat lambs) property in south eastern Victoria, Jane studied at the University of Queensland, specialising in Rangeland Management.

During her university studies Jane did practical work in the Gulf (Georgetown) and industry placement at Charters Towers, being the first student placement to work on the Wambiana Grazing Trial.

Since graduating, Jane has been fortunate to experience many roles within the Queensland grazing industry, predominately in the north.

She initially supported industry through extension and community engagement and later became a partner in a breeding operation in north Queensland. Recently Jane spent time in the Northern Territory with the Alice Springs Department of Primary Industry and Resources team working on the Business Management Advisory Project as a part of Indigenous Pastoral Program, and the Quality Graze Producer Steer Challenge.

Another role she particularly loved was being a part of the North Queensland Beef Research Committee (NQBRC). While on NQBRC Jane first



learned about the MLA CashCow project and a few years later found herself collecting data for the project across north Queensland.

In her first week with Department of Agriculture and Fisheries she was using the data for a Grazing BMP presentation. Jane feels the dots are connecting up as she starts her new livestock extension officer role and is looking

forward to meeting as many people as she can and seeing plenty of western Queensland.

You can contact Jane on mobile 0472 877 271 or email: jane.tincknell@daf.qld.gov.au

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New beef videos now online



FutureBeef has recently created a series of YouTube videos featuring some of the state's leading graziers talking about their businesses.


The series of short videos covers a range of topics and profile the management practices these beef business leaders have implemented to improve their returns. The videos can be viewed by going to www.youtube.com and searching for 'FutureBeefAu'.

The videos offer insight into the sheer scope of how a grazing business operates and the many elements that a business manager must consider.

Topics covered include land management techniques such as grass cover, strategic use of watering points and tackling soil erosion to beef breeding and genetics, workplace health and safety, biosecurity and record keeping.

DAF's FutureBeef team managed the production of the videos and ensured they covered topics that were important to Queensland's grazing industry.

FutureBeef aims to use new and traditional extension methods to ensure graziers can access the latest science and technology. The team is committed to making the industry a world-leader in grazing best practice, and this YouTube video series is another great example of that.

FutureBeef is a collaboration between Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) and the governments of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. 

Smart sensor stock theft trials

CQUniversity staff are researching smart sensor technology as a way of preventing and detecting stock theft.

In collaboration with AgForce, the research project is aimed at developing a new livestock monitoring system which can be used by producers and law enforcement agencies to remotely monitor animals.

The 2001-2002 National Farm Crime Survey, conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology, found that livestock theft was the most commonly reported rural crime affecting six per cent of farms, involving 186,777 animals with an estimated annual cost of \$16 million.

However, most incidents (65 per cent) go unreported and the true cost is more likely to be closer to \$67 million a year.

Associate Professor Mark Trotter, leader of the research project says that stock theft can range from small incursions paring off a handful of animals from larger groups, all the way through to major criminal operations in which entire herds are mustered into portable yards and shipped out in semi-trailers. In all cases, the opportunity to steal is a result of the inability of the producer to constantly monitor the location and behaviour of their livestock.

CQUniversity's Precision Livestock Management team is recognised as a national leader in the




use of sensor technologies to enhance animal production.

Dr Trotter will be collaborating with Professor Steve Moore from CQUniversity's School of Engineering and Technology in adapting sensors for use on livestock, and with Dr Stuart Charters of New Zealand's Lincoln University, who is an expert in data management and visualization.

Dr Trotter says that one of the limitations of the National Livestock Identification System is that the location of an animal is only sporadically known when the tags are checked, such as when livestock are bought, sold or moved along the production chain - animal data cannot be accessed remotely or in real-time.

"We have designed a generic animal sensing platform with GPS location to monitor animal movement that we will test in stock theft simulations at AgForce's Belmont Research Station."

CQUniversity hosted workshops with producers directly affected by stock theft to gain insights into the types of behaviour, both criminal and animal, that can be recorded during stock theft, as well as provide feedback on how on-animal data could be best relayed to these end-users in a meaningful way. 

Holly Reid, Agricultural Economist, Charters Towers

Holly grew up on the family property, north west of Hughenden, before attending boarding school in Townsville.

After completing school Holly took a gap year and worked at home and on other properties around Hughenden. Holly then enrolled in an Agribusiness and Applied Science (Animal Production Major) degree at the University of Queensland.

As part of Holly's work placement experience she worked in the live export industry including inspecting cattle and loading ships - a highlight of her degree! After graduating in 2014, Holly gained experience in financial and productivity analysis for grazing operations with Suncorp.

After leaving Suncorp Holly returned to work on the family property at Woodstock, near



Townsville as well as contract mustering in the area. Holly recently joined the FutureBeef team as an Agricultural Economist based at Charters Towers.

You can contact Holly on 07 4761 5156 or email holly.reid@daf.qld.gov.au.

Editorial committee

Byrony Daniels, Michael Sullivan (DAF)

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Spelling strategies for recovery of pasture condition

Key points

- Improvement in the density of desirable perennial grasses is a major issue across northern Australia
- Spelling has given a small benefit to the crown cover (living material at ground level) and seedling growth of Desert blue when under a moderate stocking rate
- The expansion of Desert blue appears to be limited by a small viable seedbank
- Land condition improvement with spelling will take in the order of 10 years
- Essential management includes stocking around long-term carrying capacity, adjusting stock numbers to the amount of forage available and avoiding high grazing pressure on the paddocks around the spelled paddock



Paul Jones at the Wambiana Grazing Trial Field Day

Reduced condition of pasture and soil is common across northern Australia where desirable perennial grasses are the cornerstone for profitable and sustainable beef production.

Spelling pasture from grazing over the summer growing season is a key grazing land management recommendation.

Trials to quantify the response of native pasture to differing spelling regimes were conducted at two sites with poor condition grazing land in priority pasture communities in central and north Queensland.

Detailed recordings were made on plant lifecycles, yield, composition and soil seed banks. Spelling management to achieve pasture recovery will require time frames in the order of 10 years before there will be an obvious

impact on land condition and productivity and a moderate stocking rate is necessary for these improvements to accrue.

Key recommendations

Spelling management should be in keeping with established grazing best management practices:

- Commence spelling at the beginning of the wet season after some effective grass-growing rain (~50mm)
- Spell for the whole growing season
- Stock at long-term carrying capacity
- Vary stocking rates to match pasture available

What we did

At Monteagle near Clermont, we studied a combination of timing, duration and frequency of spelling within 'C' (poor) condition land.

Two durations of spelling (early wet season or full wet season) were combined with two frequencies of spelling (annual or biennial), and each year there was an extra, once only full wet season spelling treatment, and all were compared against non-spelled areas in the same paddock.

Monteagle had two years of very good rainfall and growing conditions followed by three very dry years. The Monteagle site had to be destocked over the 2012/13 summer following a wildfire through the trial paddock and very dry conditions.

The other site, at the Wambiana Grazing Trial, is 'C' condition land within an existing trial near Charters Towers. Similar combinations of spelling duration and frequency were compared against non-spelled areas at both a moderate and high stocking rate. The Wambiana site had one year of average rainfall and growing conditions followed by two very dry years. At both sites, plots were 20 x 20m and replicated four times.

Pasture yield, composition ground cover and soil surface characteristics were recorded, and land condition categorised. Population dynamics of the key perennial grasses Desert blue and wiregrasses were mapped in permanent quadrats. Soil cores were taken each spring to determine readily germinable seed reserves of pasture species.

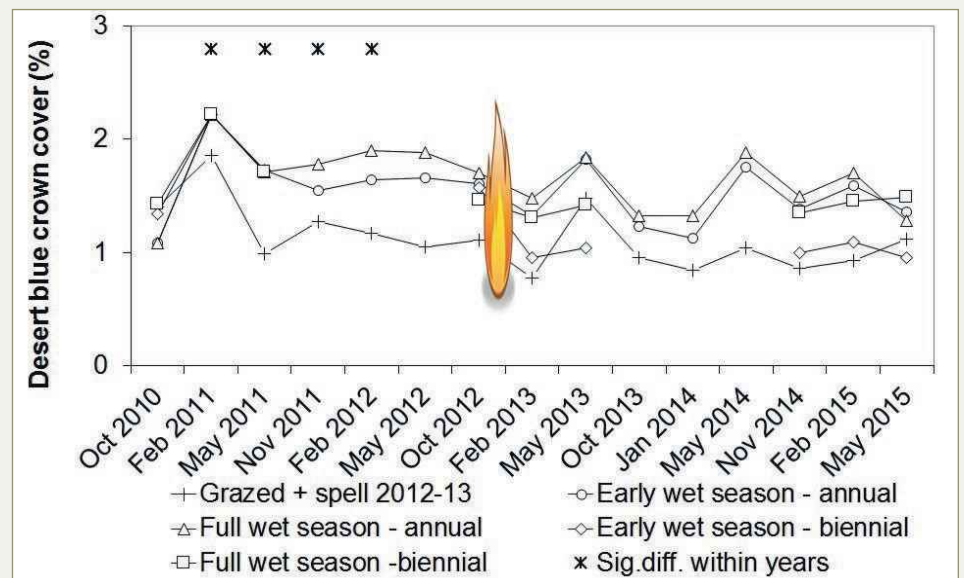


Figure 1 Effect of spelling strategies on the crown cover of Desert blue at Monteagle

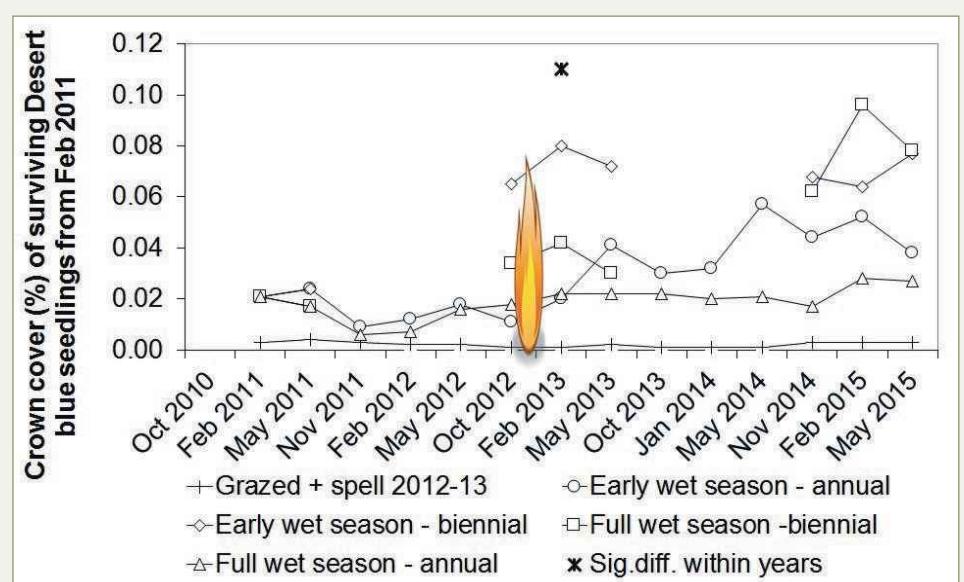


Figure 2 Effect of spelling strategies on the crown cover of the February 2011 seedlings of Desert blue at Monteagle

What we learnt

Five years of data from Monteagle showed a small, yet encouraging, response to spelling treatments on the pasture under a moderate stocking rate.

However, pasture parameters and plant dynamics were more affected by seasonal conditions than the treatments. Desert blue is of particular interest in this study because of its palatable, productive and perennial (3P) characteristics.

There was a small improvement in total crown cover and pasture yield with spelling, driven by the increase in Desert blue crown cover (Figure 1) and yield. Survival and crown cover of Desert blue seedlings appear to have increased with spelling (Figure 2).

Pasture yield, ground cover, crown cover and plant density all improved during the first two wet years of the trial and then decreased following a wildfire burn with three subsequent very dry summers.



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Wiregrasses are also of particular interest in this study because they have low palatability and forage productivity. Wiregrasses crown cover decreased following the burn and remained low for the next three dry summers. The wiregrasses had a higher turnover of plants than Desert blue. There are very low numbers of germinable 3P grass seeds in the soil regardless of year or grazing management.

Three years of data from Wambiana has shown the importance of a moderate stocking rate to realise responses to spelling.

Similar to Monteagle, the pasture parameters and plant dynamics were more affected by seasonal conditions than treatments. While spelling increased pasture yields under a high stocking rate, the response was short lived (about three months), and overall pasture yields were higher with a moderate stocking rate.

Crown cover (Figure 3 and 4) and composition of Desert blue and wiregrasses were increased with spelling under a moderate stocking rate. While the first year of the trial had average rainfall and growing conditions the two subsequent dry years reduced the pasture yields, particularly under the high stocking rate. There were very low numbers of germinating 3P grass seeds in the soil in spring regardless of year or grazing management.

Important messages

The importance of a moderate stocking rate is critical given the small and slow responses to spelling. The trial findings show the lack of significant improvement in 3P crown cover under a high stocking rate. Our results reinforce the aim of stocking rate set around long term carrying capacity. Spelling, in conjunction with a moderate stocking rate, will maintain and/or improve land condition and also generate feed reserves.

Regular wet season spelling is critical, but be flexible depending on the seasonal conditions

The trial has shown the negative consequences on pastures from a high stocking rate. Flexibility in management is required when spelling. During poor seasonal conditions if paddocks are subject to heavy grazing associated with the spelling of others, the net result can be

negative. Stocking rate is important, particularly the need for flexibility in management to adjust stock numbers according to the amount of forage available.

Further findings

A viable seedbank of the desirable perennial grasses (mainly Desert blue) and a subsequent recruitment event are critical for land condition improvement. Neither a seedbank of the required size nor suitable recruitment events occurred during the project at either site. This appears to be the underlying cause for the lack of a substantial improvement in land condition at both sites. Where an improvement in pasture parameters indicated an improvement in land condition with spelling, it was only recorded under the moderate stocking rate

Within 'C' condition land there are areas of bare soil, however there is also competition from non-3P grasses which potentially prevent an increase in crown cover and composition of the 3P grasses. Both sites had a high proportion of wiregrasses and varying levels of Indian couch, Mountain Wanderrie and Golden beardgrass.

The reasons for the competition from these grasses vary with the species - wiregrasses because they are mostly not grazed; Mountain wanderrie is long lived and mostly not grazed; Golden beardgrass is long-lived and palatable but has a large underground stem; and Indian couch spreads by runners and produces large numbers of germinable seeds.

This competition can prevent the increase in crown cover of existing 3P grasses and also the growth of their seedlings. Survival of germinated seeds in this situation is often less than one per cent.

Spelling gives a small benefit to the crown cover of existing and germinating 3P grasses and the survival of 3P seedlings. Time frames in the order of 10 years are likely before spelling will have an obvious impact on land condition and productivity.

Where a viable seedbank is present, and good seasonal conditions prevail for germination and establishment of 3P grasses, this timeframe may be considerably shorter. The ecological processes around episodic climatic events are not fully understood. However, the knowledge that a moderate stocking rate is necessary for these improvements to accrue is an important finding of this project.

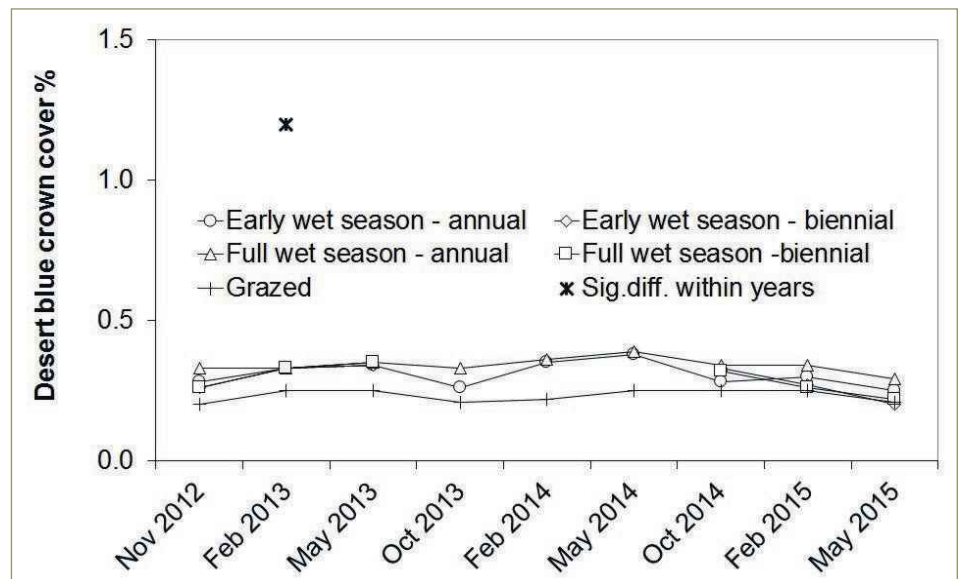


Figure 3 Effect of spelling strategies on the crown cover of Desert blue under moderate stocking rate at Wambiana

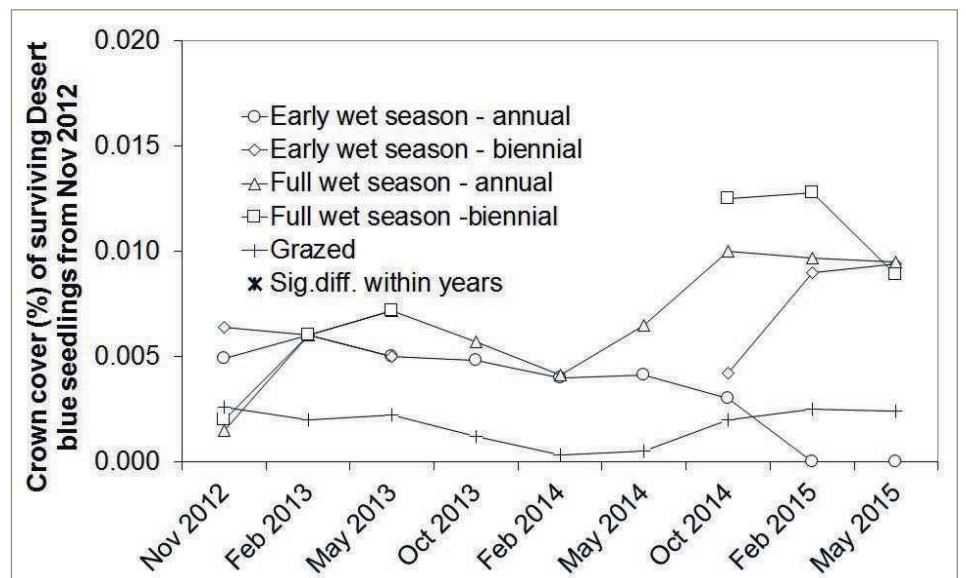


Figure 4 Effect of spelling strategies on the crown cover of the November 2012 seedlings of Desert blue under moderate stocking rate at Wambiana

The lack of recruitment of Desert blue is the main reason that pasture condition has not improved. A lack of information on the population biology of Desert blue, particularly reproduction by seed and growing points, is seen as a major deficiency in understanding the current results.

This does not detract from the importance of 3P grasses for sustainability and profitability, nor the understanding that wet season spelling should be practised for the improvement and/or maintenance of land condition. There is strong confidence that land condition will improve with spelling and good grazing management, although it will take longer to measure than initially thought. Further monitoring and research

on the impact of spelling on key pasture species to better understand land condition changes under conservative management practice is planned for the Wambiana site.

We thank the property owners, managers and their staff for cooperation, support and interest during the project, for sharing their records, experience and knowledge, and also for their generous hospitality which made the field work all the more enjoyable. Funding is acknowledged from MLA and DAF.

Paul Jones
Senior Scientist
DAF Emerald
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Information for rural business in Central Queensland



Project targets buffalo flies with new controls

Controls targeting one of Australia's most significant cattle pests, buffalo flies, will be investigated in a new research project aimed at providing area-wide control and preventing its southward spread.

The project is one of 18 new on-farm research, development and adoption (RD&A) projects to receive Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) investment instigated through MLA's new regional consultation model, giving producers a direct say in the direction of RD&A funding most relevant to them.

The three-year project will focus on direct control of buffalo fly populations using a control agent known as Wolbachia. It is anticipated that infection with the insect-infecting bacterium in male buffalo flies will lead to effective sterility of female flies that could then potentially be used to reduce field populations.

MLA research & development manager – On-farm Innovation & Adoption, Dr Johann Schröder, said investigating alternatives to pesticides to control buffalo flies could potentially provide many animal welfare and productivity benefits to the cattle industry.

"It's estimated that the cost of buffalo flies in cattle across Australia at current prevalence is \$99 million per annum," Dr Schröder said.

"Buffalo flies entered mainland Australia near Darwin in 1838 and have traditionally affected northern cattle. However, they have spread more than 1000 kilometres southward over the past 40 years and have now been found as far south as Maitland, Dubbo, Bourke and Narromine in NSW, and across to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory."

The new research project is being led by Dr Peter James from the Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAAFI) at the University of Queensland.

Dr James said climate variability would result in increased economic and welfare impacts in buffalo fly endemic areas and even more rapid spread into new areas.

"It also appears that buffalo flies may be adapting to cooler temperatures at the edge of their range," Dr James said.

"There has been little research into alternative means of controlling buffalo flies for many years, and control on most properties usually depends on chemical treatments.

"Buffalo flies can reach very high numbers on susceptible animals with each fly biting cattle 20 to 40 times per day to feed, and there is a substantial body of information concerning impacts on productivity."

Dr James said a laboratory colony of buffalo flies has been established for the research project, the first of its kind in Queensland, and a cell line has also been developed to facilitate micro-injection of the buffalo flies with the Wolbachia.

"MLA funded the establishment of this laboratory-reared colony, which will allow us to readily test the effects of Wolbachia on reproduction, fitness and survival," Dr James said.

"Once we have examined the potential for this method to be used in an area-wide approach to contain the spread of buffalo flies, future projects could see Wolbachia-infected buffalo flies released into field buffalo fly populations.

"Wolbachia is capable of quickly spreading itself through insect populations by manipulating its host's reproductive processes."

Dr James said a technique using Wolbachia is currently showing good results in northern Queensland in the control of dengue fever transmitted by the Aedes aegypti mosquito.

Research has shown that when introduced into the Aedes aegypti mosquito - the primary species responsible for transmitting human viruses such as dengue fever and Zika - Wolbachia can stop these viruses from being transmitted to people.

Source: Meat and Livestock Australia

The North Australia Beef Research Council (NABRC)

The North Australia Beef Research Council, or NABRC, provides leadership and advice to organisations who either invest in, or undertake beef cattle research, development and extension (RD&E) in Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia.

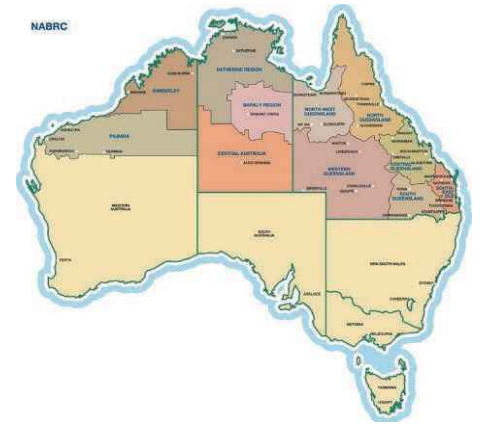
NABRC is an independent organisation made up of producer representatives, research organisations and education providers. NABRC does not fund RD&E, nor employ any RD&E personnel, rather, its role is to influence the RD&E agenda.

NABRC helps ensure that innovation and learning in the northern beef industry addresses industry's priority issues. The network is stable and mature and there is a pre-existing culture of collaboration across northern Australia, and strong relationships amongst key players.

NABRC identifies research, development and adoption (RD&A) priorities based on advice from 11 regional beef research committees (RBRCs) across Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. NABRC research, development and adoption priorities contribute to the national priorities for grass-fed beef research, development and adoption.

NABRC comprises:

- Eleven Regional Beef Research Committees (RBRCs) across northern Australia (6 in Qld, 3 in NT, 2 in WA), each Chaired by a local beef producer. The below organisations are all represented in the committees.
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)
- Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAAFI)
- Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF)
- Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia (DAFWA)
- Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries (DPIF)
- Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA)
- University of Queensland (UQ)
- James Cook University (JCU)
- CQ University (CQU)
- University of Western Australia (UWA)
- AgForce



- NT Cattleman's Association (NTCA)
- Kimberley Pilbara Cattleman's Association (KPCA)

The eleven regional committees of NABRC are:

- Central Queensland
- North Queensland
- North West Queensland
- South Queensland
- South-East Queensland
- Western Queensland Barkly Region – NT
- Central Australia – NT
- Katherine Region – NT
- Kimberley – WA
- Pilbara – WA

The Central Queensland Beef Research Committee comprises of six producers (Swin Hudson (Chair), Mark Driscoll, Stu Barrett, Bec Comiskey, Catriona Pearce and Sean Conaghan as well as Dave Swain (CQU), Bronwyn Roberts (FBA), Peter Milne (Community), Ken Murphy (DAF and Secretary) and a representative from QAAFI.

The Regional Committee meets 2-3 times per year to identify research priorities for the region, support and encourage new and existing projects, support extension and keep abreast of research from other regions that may be relevant to our region. If anyone has queries on the CQBRC they can contact the Secretary (Ken Murphy) on 4843 2637 or ken.murphy@daf.qld.gov.au.

Further information about NABRC and its RBRCs is available at: <http://jackiekyte.com.au/nabrc/>



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Leading Sheep

— keep ahead with beneficial technology

One of Leading Sheep's objectives is to promote beneficial technology to sheep producers. So this edition of Flock talk also has a technology focus.

The first article proves that age is no barrier to technology as webinars become more user-friendly and improve the accessibility to information and experts. This producer encourages others to take the time to learn how simple it is to join these interactive, online sessions.

While the second article is a case study from a producer on the Queensland/New South Wales border who has introduced some sheep handling equipment to minimise the physicality of working with sheep.

Leading Sheep is also planning a number of sessions across the state in June focusing on remote monitoring of water and stock — so watch out for the details on www.leadingssheep.com.au. Alternatively join the Leading Sheep mailing list to make sure you are kept up to date with what is happening in your area, visit www.leadingssheep.com.au, click on the 'members' tab and enter your details.

Nicole Sallur, Flock talk Editor
Leading Sheep project manager &
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Age no barrier to sheep producers saving time with online learning

At 75 years of age, John Ford has mastered the technology of Leading Sheep webinars and is urging others to take the time to discover how simple it is to join in their interactive, online sessions.

Mr Ford regularly connects to the webinars from his property at Mungallala, west of Mitchell in South West Queensland, on topics ranging from ewe nutrition to sheep diseases.

"Technology is becoming increasingly user-friendly and webinars make information much more accessible than in the past when I would drive three or four hours to attend a seminar," he said.

"I'm able to engage with the experts that I would otherwise not have had the chance to meet, and I can join a session while I'm inside having my lunch."

Having an open mind and taking advantage of the resources available to you are two of the key aspects of moving forward with livestock production, according to Mr Ford.

"If we are going to stay in business we simply have to keep up with technology," he said.

"There are some incredible things available to us at just the click of a button and I would encourage anyone who is interested to connect to a webinar — you might be surprised what you could learn."

Mr Ford accesses webinars on his PC with a satellite Activ8 internet connection which is able to support watching the webinar, listening in to the commentary and joining question time by typing his questions, to which the speaker then responds to the whole group.

"I like to compare it to reading a magazine, where if you have a burning question about the content, you can't ask someone that knows the answer right then and there, whereas in the webinars, question time allows me to get the answer from an expert on the spot."

In previous webinars, Mr Ford has obtained valuable information to improve his operation, ranging from breeding programs to nutritional

needs during pregnancy and lambing.

"This kind of information is particularly useful for us in Queensland at this time, since we are suffering from this drought," Mr Ford said.

For more information on Leading Sheep webinars go to www.leadingssheep.com.au. If you have any questions or need assistance joining the next webinar, call Nicole Sallur on 07 4530 1270.

What is a webinar and how does it work?

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John Ford regularly connects to webinars from his property and urges others to take the time to discover how simple it is to join in the interactive, online sessions.

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Embracing innovation to make sheep handling easier on-property

Mungindi prime lamb producers Ranald and Noela Warby believe those in agriculture need to embrace innovation and technology, especially if it saves labour costs and reduces the physicality of on-property work.

The couple run a Dohne prime lamb operation on their 4000ha property, Barrakee, on the Queensland/New South Wales border. They introduced Dohne rams from Roseville Park, Dubbo to their Merino flock 12 years ago, with the aim of turning off prime lambs and maintaining an average of 19-20 micron wool.

The flock has been pure Dohne for the past seven years and Mr Warby has now introduced rams from the Pye family's Calga stud at Coonamble.

In a good season they turn off prime lambs, but a run of dry years has forced them to shift focus and sell stores into local and interstate feedlots, including an operation at Murray Bridge in South Australia.

Like many family operations in regional Australia, the couple handled the bulk of the daily work on the property themselves, only bringing in contractors as necessary for jobs, like crutching.

But the couple are staunch advocates of innovation and new technology and Mr Warby credits Leading Sheep with helping producers, like him, keep up with advances in handling equipment and on-property practices that ultimately make his operation more efficient.

"Leading Sheep offers practical advice, knowledgeable speakers and good demonstrations, and it's good to get out and meet up with other producers and have time off the property while still gaining knowledge," he said.

Last year they put this commitment to embracing technology in action, purchasing an Arrow V-Express handler to reduce handling, save labour and offset some of the more physically taxing elements of sheep work.

The V-Express is a portable sheep handler that features hydraulic belts on either side that move the sheep along in single file, enabling



Ranald Warby is a staunch advocate of innovation and credits Leading Sheep with helping producers, like him, keep up with advances like the sheep handling equipment pictured here.

the producer or contractor to mouth, drench, vaccinate, tag and backline before tipping them on their backs to crutch, scan or trim their feet.

Today Mr Warby is a convert to the benefits of the machine saying it has allowed him to perform a number of tasks on his sheep in just one pass. Gone, too, are the days of fighting rams in a race when drenching and the usual tired back after a day of crutching lambs.

"In one afternoon I crutched, vaccinated and drenched 300 ewe weaners in the V-Express with one person helping, and it wasn't hard work at all. At the end of the day, I had three jobs accomplished," Mr Warby said.

"With the sheep up off the ground they're not fighting you, and you can also tip them onto their backs quite simply and easily and work on them at bench height."

Previously he would have crutched the sheep on the board as part of a job that would have included his entire 2000 head flock, with the contract help of two or three crutchers and a rouseabout.

Mr Warby bought his machine last year and set it to one side of an undercover drafting pen, ensuring that sheep flow smoothly through the drafting race and up a low 50cm ramp into

the V-Express, which measures approximately 90cm wide and 3m long.

It was his experience with a Harrington sheep handler many years ago that encouraged him to purchase the V-Express.

"A Harrington sales rep wanted a place to park his machine while he visited some clients so he left it here. I drenched 5000 ewes with it and found it to be very useful," Mr Warby said.

Over the past three years he has employed contractors with VE machines to pregnancy scan his ewes, because the contractor said he found it more efficient to have the ewes on their backs for scanning.

"The V-Express made that easy. As the ewes are coming along between the two belts, you place your hand on their chest and tip them over onto their backs without a struggle as the belts move them forward," Mr Warby said.

The V-Express is operated by a foot controller. The conveyor belts make a V shape that can be narrowed to contain shorn sheep or widened for woolly sheep, and the user has full control over the forwards and backwards motion.

"There are also hock restraints for crutching and when you're finished, you just reverse the

- Ranald and Noela Warby run 2000 Dohne sheep on their 4000ha property, Barrakee, at Mungindi.
- They generally turn off prime lambs, but recent dry seasons have seen them sell stores into local and interstate feedlots.
- Last year they introduced a V-Express handler to reduce handling, labour requirements and the physicality of regular sheep handling jobs.



Ranald Warby is a convert to the benefits of sheep handling equipment as it has allowed him to perform a number of tasks on his sheep in just one pass and has off-set some of the more physically taxing elements of sheep work.

belts slightly so the restraints release and the sheep are free to go," Mr Warby explained.

The machine is driven by a quiet hydraulic motor available in both electric and petrol versions and on 6m hoses, so it can be placed well away from the working area.

While Mr Warby says it is difficult to quantify how much money or how many hours of work the V-Express has saved, he believes the machine's major benefit has been enabling him to perform a multitude of tasks on a sheep at one time with minimum physical effort.

He says it's not accurate to estimate the cost of the V-Express verses hiring in contractors, because with the latter he would run through his entire mob of 2000 head and cost/per head rates come back the more stock numbers handled. In contrast the V-Express allows producers to tackle jobs with smaller mobs.

"The benefit is in the reduced physical effort on the bloke doing the job and the reduced stress on the sheep from using the conveyor belt, which are hard to quantify in dollar figures."

He says one benefit of the V-Express is the ability to do several jobs at once but he needs another person to keep the sheep coming through to him.

"It definitely makes the work easier. For example, our rams weigh up to 130kg fully grown, but when they're in the belts they don't fight at all. Then they are at bench height and we can tag, crutch, drench and put a backline over their heads to prevent flystrike, all in one go."

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