

Mt Coolon Case Study – Development of a Rotational Grazing Records Chart

Catchment

Burdekin

What is the property area used for grazing?

27,243 ha

What is the herd size?

3500-4000 head (according to seasonal variation)

Overview of grazing operation

Mt Coolon station is owned by Denton and Goscelyn Sullivan, who have had a controlling interest in the property since 2012.

They are the third generation of Sullivan's to be associated with Mt Coolon, which was purchased by the family in 1966. The business incorporates breeding, backgrounding and fattening enterprises, with both southern and northern markets targeted, depending on seasons and prices.

Maintaining groundcover is an important management consideration at Mt Coolon, with conservative stocking rates providing opportunities to rest country. Keeping the cover on also provides some insurance against variable seasons and allows for a quick response when rain does fall. Land condition across the property is regularly monitored and a number of photo monitoring sites have been set up.

Managing grazing pressure is the most effective tool in maintaining groundcover and the Sullivan's have moved towards a rotational grazing system to improve their management in this area.

There are generally between seven and eight mobs of cattle rotating through their own circuit of paddocks, with a total sixty paddocks making up this network of rotations. As the number of mobs increased, keeping track of the graze and rest periods started to become increasingly complex. Cross referencing pocket notebooks, diary entries and a paddock record book was time consuming and inefficient.

As in many family businesses, the 'office' tends to be Goscelyn's area, so the search for a grazing recording template was added to her job list. Wanting a new system that was easy to use and maintain and provided a quick, visual output for anyone in the business to access, gave Goscelyn the criteria for comparing the current commercial options. Expensive and

unreliable internet connectivity on their property (as in many regional areas) immediately ruled out any systems that operated online or required regular updates.

Not finding anything that really met their needs, Goscelyn made the decision to develop her own recording system using Excel. With a university degree in Animal Nutrition and a working background in the stock feed industry, Goscelyn was confident she could create a template that would work for their business. An association with local DAF extension officer, Mellissa Holzwart (through the 'Herd Recording Project) provided guidance in the design and a variety of templates were experimented with. The downside to a custom-built template is the time involved in creating and then refining something from scratch. Three young children, a range of community commitments and everyday property work, added to the challenge.

The decision to become an accredited grazing BMP business in May 2018 became the catalyst for getting the job completed. The Grazing BMP audit requires evidence of grazing practices used to maintain groundcover and the grazing chart would be exactly that, showing graze and rest periods for the paddocks on Mt Coolon. With the audit date set, the Mt Coolon grazing chart was finalised and put into use. Immediately the benefits of a visual tool to quickly see where cattle were and how long paddocks had been utilised, were appreciated by all involved in the business. It provided a central location where all the important data was displayed and allowed planning of future rotations to happen efficiently.



Figure 1 - Goscelyn and Denton Sullivan after successfully completing their Grazing BMP audit in 2018.

In support of the grazing chart, the Sullivan's also accessed two online decision support tools developed by the Queensland Government, as evidence for their audit. A FORAGE regional groundcover comparison report downloaded from the Long Paddock website indicated that the ground cover trends on Mt Coolon are consistently above the regional average across all land types. A similar report downloaded from the VegMachine website

showed the same result, with the advantage of being at the paddock rather than whole of property scale.

In summary, the Sullivan's are careful and responsive land managers that focus on maintaining land condition by managing groundcover. By accessing new tools and creating new recording systems, they have made the job of monitoring and planning easier and more user friendly for everyone in the business. The added advantage is that they now have documented evidence of the good work being done on ground, backed up by satellite imagery - confirming the effectiveness of the management practices they have implemented.

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