

Drought and climate adaptation program

GrazingFutures Case Study

“Early weaning and mitigating risk in dry times”

Mark and Carolyn Redgen run a 1200 ha breeding and weaner turnoff operation primarily on “The Rockies” south of Roma, Queensland. Since the purchase of ‘The Rockies’ in 2003, the Redgens acquired 1800 ha, ‘Waldergrove’ (1800 ha) in 2004 and ‘Lorelle Downs’ (800 ha) in 2020 in the Maranoa region. As conservative stockers, the Redgens have always focused on sustainable management practices to maximise their land and livestock condition. This led the Redgens to explore early weaning as a management tool, to enhance cow productivity and calf health during dry times, and to conserve vital groundcover.

To effectively integrate early weaning into their drought management strategy, the Redgens actively engaged in learning opportunities including: the **GrazingFutures** and Southern Queensland Landscape ‘A yarn at the yards’ event at Basin Downs (Surat in June 2018) and the **GrazingFutures** and Désirée Jackson-led ‘Making sense of early weaning’ webinar in 2019.

These events equipped the Redgens with the information and resources that ultimately led to the implementation of beneficial on-property practice change. Facing prolonged drought and tough seasonal conditions, the Redgens first implemented early weaning in 2019.

Looking to reduce their stock numbers and sell older cattle at a premium, the Redgens weaned calves at 12 to 16 weeks rather than the traditional 9 months. They also placed 10% of their herd into a local feedlot for 8-weeks enabling cattle to meet MSA grid specifications at slaughter.

“Early weaning allowed us to maintain flexibility in our enterprise. We were able to sell our older cows earlier, and at a higher weight, condition and value. We reached a price point that was well above the average during those times,” Mr Redgen said.

“Allowing us to cull more productively, the early weaning process drove increased cash flow to our enterprise and mitigated some of our losses and risk during these dry times.”

The Redgens cited saleability and flexibility as the core benefits of early weaning, with sale cattle targeting premium weight and age specifications, while stock and feed reserves remain in a healthy position.

Amidst tough seasonal conditions with diminishing financial resources and manpower, changing their herd composition allowed the Redgens to enhance on-farm decision making and manage risk by strategically feeding their livestock towards a desired outcome.

Drought and climate adaptation program

Wanting to maintain as much body condition during the weaning process as possible, the Redgens kept the weaners in the yards for two weeks providing supplementary feed and high quality hay (Figure 1). The weaners were then run in a holding paddock for four weeks with supplementary feed, hay and copra. Weaners also received a 5-in-1 vaccine.

Figure 1. High quality hay is essential for successful early weaning.



“During dry times, we provided calves with a highly nutritious diet to help maximise their growth potential and reach a quality and highly saleable level,” said Mr Redgen.

“And to help facilitate the change for the calves, we began feeding them the high protein feed, copra meal, while still on the cow (Figure 2). In the future, we’ll also look at limestone addition to compensate for the lower levels of key nutrients in the copra-based ration.”

They firmly believe educating calves to feed pre-weaning is an essential part of the system, because it allows producers to move weaners out of the yards and into pasture sooner, reducing expenditure on hay.

Drought and climate adaptation program

“With no extra costs outside feed and lick, the weaners came through in strong condition and were well educated and adapted to the supplementary feed before returning to the paddock,” Mr Redgen said.

Through this weaning and feeding system, the Redgens were able to reduce stress on the calves, minimise weight loss as well as increase livestock management and decision-making options.

“The calves that have come through the early weaning process have been extremely quiet, so we didn’t need to cull for temperament. The early weaned calves are also more comfortable moving in and out of the yards and are well educated to being worked by dogs,” Mr Redgen said.

In terms of labour efficiency, although early weaning itself requires more intensive management of calves at the time to implement this practice change, quieter cattle are far easier to handle in the long-term. As a result, husbandry and overall observation of herd health became simpler and more efficient for the Redgens.

The decision to early wean proved to be a good short-term drought management strategy, enabling the business to change and adjust to seasons and opportunities, minimising some of the expected dry-induced stock and financial losses.

Today, the Redgens are seeing the benefits of this system extending beyond improved weaner performance, productivity and financial returns, to maintaining and managing their land condition.

Early weaning during dry times saw reduced grazing pressure on pastures, enhancing productivity and organic matter in the soil and reducing erosion through maintaining groundcover.

Taking this approach has ensured cows have greater access to feed and demands on pasture are reduced, maximising sustainability and future forage production.

The Redgens commitment to sustainable land and livestock management practices has proven to be a good strategy when it comes to withstanding drought.

Protecting pastures has helped maximise the productivity of the land. Low stocking rates during the dry has given the soil and pastures the opportunity to rehabilitate and more readily respond to rain, creating more resilient pastures for future grazing.

Increasing the pasture quality to improve nutrition and overall performance of the cattle grazing these pastures is a much better option than the significant financial outlay for additional feed required to run higher cattle numbers on the property.

Based on the success and management opportunities made available through early weaning, the Redgens will use early weaning as a drought management strategy in perpetuity to maximise the saleability of culled cows and improve pasture-soil health and productivity.

Drought and climate adaptation program

Complementing their conservative and sustainable management approach, early weaning has positioned the business in good stead moving forward by maximising land and livestock performance.

Using alternate livestock management strategies enables the Redgens to be more proactive in their decision-making and adaptive to seasonal conditions, all of which are essential in conserving vital groundcover and supporting pasture recovery when it rains.

Actively engaging in learning opportunities prior to and during the implementation of practice change, equipped the Redgens with the knowledge, skills and confidence to effectively implement early weaning during dry times, and helped them get the most out of their land and livestock.



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