

# Threat of Indian couch

Indian couch in the Burdekin catchment: Why we need to know more!

**I**NDIAN couch (*Bothriochloa pertusa*), also known as Indian bluegrass, is an invasive naturalised grass that has expanded its range in the Burdekin catchment, covering not only Goldfields country, but also north of Charters Towers on the more fertile basaltic soils.

Indian couch tolerates heavy grazing and provides some carrying capacity for beef businesses. It is also a creeping grass with runners, providing good soil surface cover.

However, it is not particularly productive or drought tolerant and has poor root structure when compared to the desired native or improved perennial pasture species, such as native desert bluegrass (*Bothriochloa ewartiana*).

Indian couch grass can also replace the desirable 3P grasses in the paddock and form monocultures with loss of biodiversity and which are inherently unstable and susceptible to collapse through pests and disease.

What can older generation producers tell us about Indian couch expansion in the Burdekin?

On the Basalt, there has been an increase in Indian couch since the late 80s and early 90s. There was no recollection of the grass in the late 60s. The increase in Indian couch might simply be a sign of the times - 'Everyone is running more cattle and Indian couch

takes advantage of this'.

There are also good sources of seed around these days, such as air strips and lawns. Seed is easily spread by vehicles, bikes and four wheelers. The grass can be found along power lines and a common corridor of spread into the Basalt has been along roads. Producers expressed concern about what to do if Indian couch renders land unproductive or less productive.

As for the Goldfields, observations of Indian couch in the 70s included 'small patches in the horse paddock'. Drought feeding in the 80s with molasses and urea saw native grasses being eaten out allowing Indian couch to spread.

Initial views of Indian couch were positive as cattle ate it all! 'In those days, Indian couch was good to the last drop - just like Johnny Walker whisky', and 'in 1991 during a big wet there was enormous growth of Indian couch. Seed was harvested because there was a demand for it!'

Looking back now producers might think differently: 'It's not good! Indian couch doesn't handle drought like native tussock grasses. It's only a surface grass so it needs to come back from seed compared with native grasses that survive and reshoot'.

What are next generation producers in the Burdekin saying?

For producers on the



Indian couch dominant pasture on the Basalt, north of Charters Towers. Photo taken on May 7, 2019.



Indian couch is an invader of space. With a source of seed and the right growing conditions, this grass is capable of invading native pastures irrespective of how they are grazed, with heavy grazing exacerbating the spread.

Basalt, Indian couch might not be on everyone's radar. Those that have noticed it describe it as good at filling in the spaces and better

than a weed. That said, 3P native grasses such as Desert bluegrass are still preferred. There are serious concerns about productivity and

profitability losses associated with increases in Indian couch.

Observations in the paddock reveal Indian couch dominance occurs in areas of high grazing pressure or after a fire where grazing pressure was not reduced. Consideration to management of Indian couch might need to include conservative stocking to give better grasses a chance to remain competitive, and to spell paddocks, and avoid over-utilisation of native pastures during prolonged droughts.

As for current producers grazing Goldfields country

near Charters Towers, pastures have high Indian couch prevalence and have had for quite some time now making it more of an inherited issue.

One producer noted that failure to manage 3P grasses will only allow more Indian couch to come in: 'There can be some fluctuations in the amount of Indian couch in the pasture, but overgrazing, and pressure at the wrong time of the year can see pastures default back to Indian couch'.

This same producer also observed that, 'Ploughing in some paddocks really offset Indian couch prevalence as buffel grass grew, but Buffel is hard to sustain'.

They also commented that one way to maximise value from Indian couch is to compliment it with stylo. When Indian couch starts to dry up the stylo can then be browsed. As a result, the management options considered for the Goldfields may need to include a combination of mechanical intervention in conjunction with conservative stocking and resting.

Where to from here?

The development of 'best-bet' management guidelines for producers will take place over the next 12 months as part of a producer-driven research project led by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) and jointly funded by Meat & Livestock Australia.

Advisory and technical panels will be formed and practical solutions will be determined through examination of producer knowledge and research findings.

■ Dr Nicole Spiegel, DAF, 0436 951 988.

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# Investing in your future productivity

HIGH cattle prices over recent years are providing producers with opportunities to invest back into their beef operations to lift pasture productivity and herd performance.

Successful producers are improving these key areas to achieve productivity and profitability gains.

#### 1. Stock water:

In many cases, dams are not large enough and are prone to cattle bogging issues, or have proven to be unreliable during dry years. Reliable underground water supplies and well-designed water distribution systems are essential in managing dry years and improving grazing distribution.

#### 2. Stocking rates:

Managing your grass-cattle balance drives liveweight gain, weaning, and death rates. Sell-down, agistment or destocking 'trigger points' (late February and Easter) in the dry years is a successful

tactic used by leading northern producers.

These successful producers combine 'trigger point' decision dates with running moderate stocking rates where grass supplies and cattle numbers are reasonably balanced during most years (seven years in 10).

#### 3. Phosphorus:

Trials and producer experience show large returns from investing \$10-\$15/head/year in phosphorus. Phosphorus needs to be out as soon as green grass is available. If lick consumption is too low or high, change your recipe or check in with your local Department of Agriculture and Fisheries adviser who can assist with recipe options and calculations.

#### 4. Age of turnoff:

Where branding rates are often around 50 per cent in the northern dry tropics, it is more profitable to run fewer breeders and more growing cattle, and aim to

have sale weights over 300kg live. Avoid the 'weaner trap' or selling young cattle where branding rates are low.

#### 5. Sown pastures:

Over-sowing stylos (seca and verano) into native pastures will lift annual liveweight gain and carrying capacities in districts with rainfall over 700 millimetres.

A starting point for producers inexperienced in sown pastures is to seed down (by aircraft or tractor at 2kg/ha bare seed) grazed-down weaner paddocks prior to first storms and/or apply superphosphate to boost the productivity of stylo-grass paddocks. Annual liveweight gains reached 216kg/head on fertilised native pastures and stylos at Swans Lagoon (1996-97), while 210kg/head (2018-20) was achieved on fertilised buffel and stylos on Pinnarendi.

■ DAF Northern Beef and Feedbase Team, 0427 146063 or 0427 378412.



Managing your grass-cattle balance drives liveweight gain, weaning, and death rates.



Start planning your visit to Beef 2021 now. Photo by Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

## Beef 2021 gets the green light

BEEF Australia recently announced that Beef 2021 is going ahead in Rockhampton in May.

As a principal partner of the event, the Queensland government is thrilled to hear that Beef 2021 is on!

We'll have booths at the Sidney Kidman Pavilion and in the TechYards, showcasing regional initiatives, in-

novative ag-tech workshops and pop-up chat sessions.

Our Drought and Climate Adaptation Program (DCAP) team will be there to talk about ways to build resilience to drought and climate impacts that can help you manage financial risks while making important decisions around droughts and climate variability.

We'll also show you a range of tools and strategies to help manage degraded land and re-establish ground cover, plus new seminars around legumes for grass-fed beef production, pasture dieback research and drought and disaster management—just to name a few.

Tickets go on sale in February 2021.

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Information for rural business in North Queensland



# Burdekin graziers first to meet reef regulations

GRAZIERS in the Burdekin are the first required to meet the Queensland government's new minimum practice agricultural standards for grazing introduced on December 1, 2020.

Under the reef protection regulations, graziers need to take action to improve land condition and ground cover on areas of grazing land with less than 50 per cent ground cover (measured at September 30 each year).

There are four standard conditions graziers must meet under the new rules, but it is up to you what actions you take.

The standard conditions do not mandate stocking rates or a land management plan.

It is also recognised that it may be impractical and cost prohibitive to fully rehabilitate some areas of very degraded land, but steps must be taken to prevent further decline or expansion of these areas.

The minimum practice agricultural standards for grazing, which aim to reduce the amount of soil and nutrients that end up in local waterways, will roll out in the Fitzroy in December 2021 and across the Wet Tropics, Mackay Whitsunday and Burnett Mary in December 2022.

The staged implementation is based on the priority areas for improving water quality.

However, graziers in all reef regions have been required to keep general records, for example, agricultural chemicals applied



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to land, since December 1, 2019.

Help with improving land condition and ground cover is available through a number of local projects and service providers.

One example is the Grazing Resilience and Sustainable Solutions (GRASS) program, which provides graziers with one-on-one support to develop and implement tailor-made land management action plans for areas of poor (C) or degraded (D) land condition in the Burdekin, Fitzroy and Burnett Mary regions.

These action plans provide the latest tools and information to help graziers identify, improve and maintain land condition with a specific



For more information about the regulations and to order a grazing information pack, visit [www.qld.gov.au/ReefRegulations](http://www.qld.gov.au/ReefRegulations).

focus on improving ground cover and reducing soil loss.

Participating landholders may also be eligible for funding for works identified in action plans such as small-to-medium scale gully remediation and riparian

and hillslope fencing.

The program is funded through the Queensland government's Reef Water Quality Program and delivered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, NQ Dry Tropics, Fitzroy Ba-

sin Association and the Burnett Mary Regional Group.

One of the benefits of being involved in a project such as GRASS is that graziers can be considered a lower priority for compliance inspections up to June 2022.

Another program available to eligible graziers is the Queensland government Farming in Reef Catchments Scheme through which landholders can receive a rebate of up to \$1000 to help offset the costs of obtaining professional and agronomic advice about managing nutrient and sediment run-off.

Advice must be obtained from an Accredited Agricultural Adviser registered by the Queensland Rural Industry Development Authority.



The effect of long-term overgrazing on pasture composition and ground cover near Charters Towers.

## Bare ground and your bottom line

Did you know bare ground results in poor soil health, high run-off and soil loss, which affects how much grass grows, and therefore your cattle performance?

Advantages of high ground and pasture cover include:

- reduced run-off and higher water retention for pasture growth
- healthier soil biology
- plants ready to harness the free services of sunlight and rainfall
- higher carrying capacity
- greater profitability

Disadvantages of bare ground include:

- high run-off and low water infiltration
- higher soil temperature and less soil biological activity
- high weed infestation threat
- reduced carrying capacity
- high feeding costs
- lower profitability

Understanding your ground cover and how to manage it can have long term benefits for you and your family.

Maintaining groundcover is in every grazier's best interest if operating a profitable grazing beef business is a priority.

You can generate ground cover reports for your property on the Long Paddock website, [longpaddock.qld.gov.au/forage](http://longpaddock.qld.gov.au/forage).



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