

## CASE STUDY



**The McKay family owns and operates two properties, 'Umbearra' and 'Idracowra', situated along the border of the NT and SA, about a three-hour drive south of Alice Springs.**

### Property background

Angus (Gus) and Kimberley McKay and their three children manage a vast area of 8,200 square kilometres (820,000 hectares). Gus is the third generation of the McKay family on these lands.

They are custodians of diverse terrain that includes open granite range country, gum-lined creeks, mulga country, sand hill regions, river plains and flood out areas. The properties experience an average annual rainfall varying between 200–250mm.

A notable geographical feature is the rail line from Adelaide to Darwin, which extends for 130km through their property and impacts the natural water ponding in the area.

The dominant pasture species across both Idracowra and Umbearra include oaten grass, buffel grass, and kerosene grass (*Aristida contorta*) and a range of perennials including umbrella grass (*Digitaria coenicolola*) and curly windmill grass (*Enteropogon acicularis*). This rich mix of native and enhanced vegetation supports the pastoral activities on the properties.

### Cattle

Approximately 11,500 Red Angus-cross cattle graze across the sprawling landscapes of both properties. The McKays selected this breed for its exceptional fertility and Meat Standards Australia (MSA) scoring potential.

The average MSA index over the last twelve months for Umbearra was 59.79.

The McKays oversee a comprehensive range of cattle operations, from self-replacing breeding programs to turning off heavy steers. The cattle processed from these properties are certified organic, adhering to both the United States Department of Agriculture National Organic Program (USDA/NOP) and Australian Standards. At full capacity, the property supports 2,000 maiden heifers, 4,500 breeders, 120 bulls and 5,000 steers.

Herd numbers are strategically adjusted based on the stock class and land system, all coordinated around essential watering points. This is identified by the carrying capacity of the various land types across the property and the estimated pasture yield. Due to the variability of rainfall in Central Australia, a conservative approach is taken to provide sufficient ongoing feed should there be limited rainfall the following year. The McKays maintain a stable stocking strategy.

“We run conservative numbers so our stocking rate doesn't change much due to seasonal conditions,” Gus said.

The McKays draw on their 60 years of family experience and expertise in managing Umbearra as well as the advice of rangeland specialists. Dr Dionne Walsh – an expert in the field who runs her own consultancy and has worked for the Northern Territory (NT) Government in research and consultancy roles around rangeland management – contributes valuable insights

into their management decisions and practices. Chris Materne, Pastoral Production Officer for the NT Government, also brings his extensive experience researching pastures and carrying capacity in rangeland environments to the table when discussing the McKays' management decisions. This collaborative strategy has been crucial in optimising the efficiency of the couple's livestock management.

### Markets

The McKays' cattle are predominantly marketed through abattoirs in Victoria and SA. All mature cattle are processed under an organic label, accredited by both the Australian Standards and the USDA/NOP. They aim to sell this portion of cattle at approximately 24–28-months-of-age, weighing between 600–700kg. The natural advantages of Central Australia, with its expansive natural landscapes, good pasture quality and minimal pollution and parasites, greatly facilitates the maintenance of organic farming practices. This environment ensures the McKays can easily meet stringent organic standards and receive price premiums.

### Breeder herd management

The McKays use a two-month controlled mating period at Umbearra for their maiden heifers once they reach approximately 300kg at 12–15-months-of-age. They use continuous mating after this initial phase. The heifer conception rate at Umbearra stands at an average of 86%. Any heifers identified as pregnancy tested empty (PTE) after this maiden mating are subsequently turned out with the steers. These heifers are then grown to a target weight of 500kg and are eventually transported to markets along with the heavy steers.

The McKays' weaning strategies enable them to consistently maintain a minimum BCS of three for both their heifers and cows. This careful management ensures the health and productivity of their livestock and their country, reflecting their commitment to quality and sustainability in their cattle operations.

### Weaning process

The McKays' approach to cattle management involves carefully managed care of both heifers and steers from the weaning stage onward. At Umbearra, they wean from 200kg (or



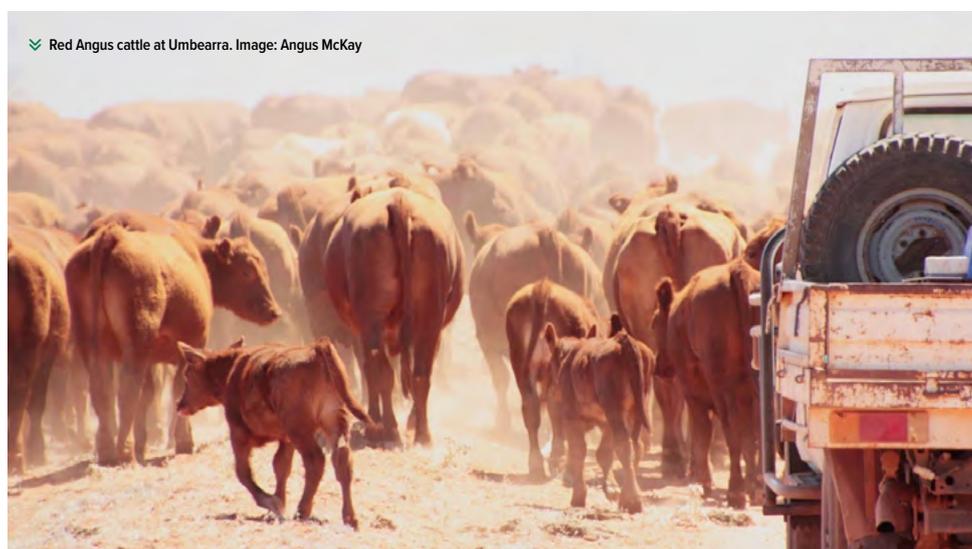
✓ The McKay family. Image: Angus McKay

approximately nine-months-of-age) to allow the heifers and cows to regain their body condition before cycling again. Once in the yards, the weaners are fed organic oaten hay. Due to their organic certification, the McKays are limited to compliant supplements and therefore wean at the higher end of the weight range. This ensures weaners have enough reserves to continue growing well without additional supplementation.

The McKays spend a significant amount of time dedicated to educating the weaners in the yards and tailing them out. They adopt a low-stress stock handling practice both inside and outside the yards at Umbearra, to ensure the wellbeing of their livestock. The tailing out activities are conducted using motorbikes to allow the weaners to be efficiently moved and fed on pasture before being returned to the yards. Additionally, the weaners undergo internal yard work and education, a process that has proven to produce animals with good temperaments.

Rings are used to castrate weaner steers. Heifers and steers are branded using a gas fire brand to maintain identification and health records. Umbearra boasts a weaning rate of approximately 90% – a testament to the McKays' high standards of cattle management and strategic planning.

“We are very happy with our weaning rate – it has taken 22 years of controlled mating to achieve these results,” Gus said.



✓ Red Angus cattle at Umbearra. Image: Angus McKay

## Mustering

The McKays use water trapping, aeroplanes, helicopters and motorbikes for mustering. The prevalence of *Indigofera*, a poisonous plant that can complicate the safe use of horses in the area has led them to favour motorbikes. Gus notes that the terrain is well-suited for motorbikes, which are consistently used during the tailing out period to maintain uniformity in their handling practices.

The McKays conduct two full musters annually at Umbarra, in addition to a mid-year pregnancy testing muster for the maiden heifers. The carefully managed mustering and weaning practices, along with conservative stocking rates, are key contributors to the property's high weaning rate. Females remain in good body condition, enabling a short post-partum anoestrus period and high pregnancy rate.

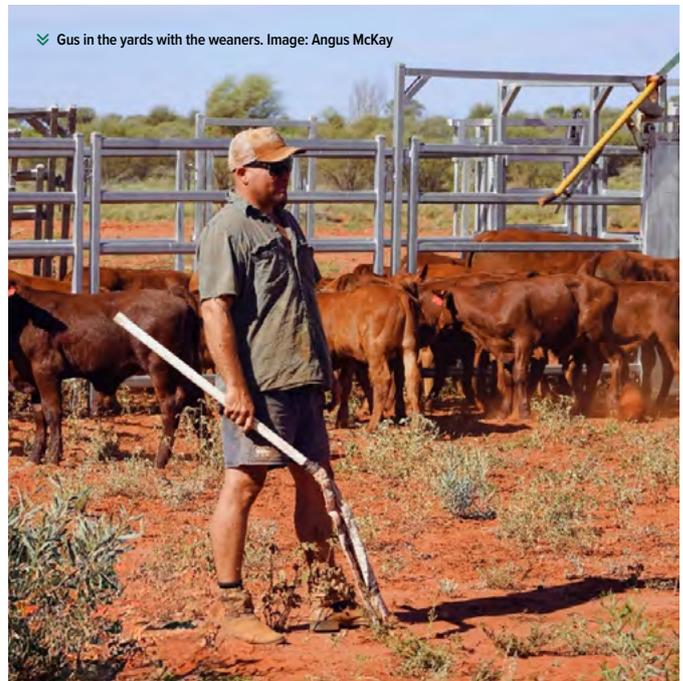
In addition to their usual mustering practices, the McKays have successfully integrated learnings from producer Bruce Maynard regarding stress-free stockmanship into their operations when working the cattle through the yards. This approach prioritises understanding and working with the natural behaviours of cattle to minimise stress during handling. By incorporating these principles, particularly during the critical periods of mustering and tailing out, the McKays ensure a consistent and gentle handling process is maintained. This adaptation approach not only prioritises the wellbeing of the cattle but also enhances the overall efficiency and safety of the operations, which keeps the animals calm and responsive. In turn, animals experience less stress when in the yards and more consistently and efficiently demonstrate daily weight gains.

## Organic certification

Like many Central Australian properties, the McKays operate Umbarra under USDA organic certification. The healthy and largely pest-free rangelands mean minimal chemical usage is required, which naturally supports organic farming practices. Approximately 50% of properties in Central Australia adopt organic operations due to these favourable conditions.

"Organic certification is pretty easy for us in our environment," Gus said.

Their primary challenge lies in securing high-quality organic hay and ensuring that urea is absent from their lick blocks. The McKays source their phosphorous lick blocks and BioChar phosphorous blocks from Ollson's Blocks as these don't contain urea so are able to pass organic certification.



✔ Gus in the yards with the weaners. Image: Angus McKay

## Data management

The McKays follow the principle of 'what isn't measured can't be managed'. Their main data-driven areas of focus are fertility and turn-off weights. They use Gallagher crush side technology and Black Box systems to monitor cattle and carcase performance. All cattle are equipped with a National Livestock Identification System (NLIS) tag to ensure full traceability of the animals and allow for electronic data recording. Additionally, breeders are assigned management tags that identify their age, enhancing their management and tracking within the herd. This systematic approach to data collection and analysis is integral to optimising the productivity and sustainability of their livestock operations.

The McKay family's weaner management strategies at Umbarra demonstrate their commitment to maintaining high standards of both cattle health and productivity. Their approach to weaning – which involves monitoring of body condition, organic feeding practices and low-stress handling techniques – ensures the wellbeing of their livestock from an early age. These efforts not only support sustainable and efficient cattle operations but also highlight the importance of strategic weaner management in achieving long-term success in the pastoral industry.



Read *Weaner management in northern beef herds* at [mla.com.au/nth-weaner-manual](https://mla.com.au/nth-weaner-manual)



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This case study was developed as part of B.GBP.0064 *Weaner Management in northern beef herds*.

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