

ARIDGRAZE PROJECT

MT DENISON Paddock CHALLENGE



INTRODUCTION

Allan, Terry and Robert Martin live and work together on Mt Denison Station, 300km north-west of Alice Springs on the edge of the Tanami Desert. Since 2022, they have taken on the opportunity to further their business and themselves, becoming involved in the 'Paddock Challenge' project alongside the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The project is exploring grazing practices, focusing on long-term carrying capacity, on a commercial station. The Martins' involvement has made for a fascinating learning journey with the brothers steadily working through what continuous improvements might look like on their property.

PROJECT REFLECTIONS

The Martins recognise that involvement has brought about a gradual change in their thinking, rather than a sudden shift. As they gather more data on pasture productivity, cattle performance, and economic factors, their confidence has grown. They now use data alongside experience, allowing them to challenge 'how things have traditionally been done'.

A central part of the shift has been considering their ideal herd. "What is the smallest viable herd we can run while maintaining profitability?" posed Terry. An analysis of data from abattoir kill sheets indicated room for improvement in individual breeder performance. Their goal now is to produce as much, or more, beef from fewer animals. They aim to boost breeder performance, improve weaning rates, and reduce the turnoff age of cattle. It's an ongoing journey.

The thinking ties directly into the long-term carrying capacity work. Modelling provided an estimate of what their country can sustainably support, and the Martins' recognise that herd numbers may at times exceed that safe level. Rather than seeing the recommended carrying capacity as a limitation, it will serve as a reference point to help guide decisions going forward.

AT A GLANCE

Key takeaways

- Herd efficiency: more beef from fewer animals by improving breeder performance, weaning rates, and turnoff age.
- Change takes time!

Challenges

- Balancing herd numbers with long-term carrying capacity
- Managing costs & risks during change.

The project underscores the value of practical learning and what is needed for change to happen.



Bottom: Terry Martin, Mt Denison



“What is the smallest possible herd we can run while maintaining profitability”

Terry Martin, Mt Denison Station

CHANGE MAKING

The Martins are approaching change in stages. They have a plan, developed with support from Senior Economist Christophe d’Abbadie (Western Australian Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development), to improve their system through targeted investments.

They will focus on areas that enhance herd control, such as fencing, water infrastructure, and mustering efficiency.

The economic information they have now allows them to prioritise upgrades that offer the best return on investment and improve management. In the past year, they invested in two new watering points. The smile of satisfaction on Terry’s face as he told us was a rewarding sight.

AN ONGOING LEARNING JOURNEY

The project underscores the value of practical learning and what’s needed for change. Training, collaboration, and advisor input have all played a role, but steady adaptation of thinking has been key.

While the challenges of running a multi-faceted business remain, their management approach has shifted. There is now clearer direction, supported by data and a defined plan. At the heart of it is a simple goal: to match herd size to land capability.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the past year, ongoing pasture data has been collected on Mt Denison Station, supported by the Northern Hub and funded by the Australian Government’s Future Drought Fund.

We are grateful to the Martin family for their involvement in the project and look forward to its continuation.

Top: annual pasture monitoring is undertaken by researchers

Bottom: remote rainfall gauges provide timely data

For more information contact:

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