Grazing BMP provides a breath of fresh air for Monto grazer
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Stu McLennan hangs up the bucket

After completing a Masters at James Cook University and a PhD at the University of New England, Stu moved to the Animal Research Institute, Yeerongpilly in 1991. After 37 years with DPI in its various forms, Stu joined the University of Queensland’s Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAFF), in October 2010, retiring in January 2016.

During his career, Stu has made major contributions to the knowledge and understanding of the nutrition of beef cattle in tropical environments.

With his early colleague, Lyle Winks, he did much of the pioneering work in developing strategic feeding systems based on the use of molasses for survival and production feeding. His research into the use of urea as an intake regulator in molasses supplements led to the very successful MIU (molasses with 8 per cent urea) feeding system.

This system is widely acknowledged as the major advance in practical cattle nutrition in northern Australia over the past 40 years. These feeding systems have contributed greatly to the improved viability of beef producers, especially in drought situations.

Stu’s systematic, practical approach to nutrition based on fundamental principles and knowledge of the industry has been greatly appreciated by producers, other scientists, extension staff and students across northern Australia. This was recognised with the North Australian Beef Research Council 2013 Scientists/Researcher Medal, which is widely acknowledged as the highest honour Australian cattle producers can bestow on a research scientist.

Grazing BMP provides a breath of fresh air for Monto grazier

Kapalide grazier, Alison Gray, attended a two day Grazing BMP workshop in Emerald last year and found the Grazing BMP program to be a recipe of ‘just what the doctor ordered’.

Alison could have quite easily found a reason to stay home and help husband John to muster, draft and transport cattle between properties. Like so many other landholders, Alison finds it difficult to afford the time to attend workshops, jugging the ever changing priorities and demands of the farm. It’s a big ask when there are horses to feed and water, cattle in the yards to tend to, and then be expected to travel about an hour to get to the workshop venue and not do any ‘real work’ for the day.

At the beginning of any one of the workshops, Alison was feeling tired, drained, and wondering why she continues to do what she does. When asked what she hoped to get out of the workshop, Alison responded: “I would just like to know that there is some positivity out there”.

Alison and husband John have four properties within the Kapalide, Gin Gin and Mt Perry districts running a 350 breeder and fattening business. Both have worked hard all of their lives to develop and expand their holdings. Their children have all grown up and left the farm to pursue their own interests, and do not wish to return to live on the family farm. The light at the end of the tunnel can at times be hard to see in times of drought.

The Grazing BMP workshops are designed to inspire the participants through presentations by guest speakers and facilitate discussions between producers to learn from each other’s experiences. The aim is to deliver information in a manner in which participants can return home and adapt to their business.

Alison was so motivated by day one of the workshop, she returned home and convinced husband John to come with her to day two. “Everything came together, and it all made sense. This morning I had a spring in my step as I fed the animals before I came to the workshop,” Allison said.

The Grazing BMP program offers a comprehensive health check for any grazing business, providing the medium for graziers to ‘have a good look’ at every aspect of their enterprise, including people and business, soil health, grazing land management, animal health and welfare and animal production. It allows landholders to assess how they are currently operating their business against a set of standards developed by the grazing industry for the grazing industry.

The Grazing BMP program was developed by Fitzroy Basin Association, AgForce Queensland and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, supported by Department of Environment and Heritage Protection.

The Burnett Mary Regional Group is committed to the protection and enhancement of the agricultural and natural environment of the

Stu has published prolifically throughout his career with over 120 publications to-date. Many of these papers were authored in partnership with long-term colleague, Dennis Poppo (formerly of CSIRO and now The University of Queensland).

In retirement, Stu remains active as a DAF volunteer fellow compiling papers and providing support and guidance for colleagues.

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Coping with mental illness in rural communities can be expensive and challenging

Untreated mental health conditions cost Australian employers more than $10 billion annually through absenteeism, reduced productivity and workers’ compensation claims, according to 2014 PwC research. While this is a significant cost, Queensland businesses can take heart knowing that investing in mental health action plans can pay dividends.

The PwC research ‘Creating a mentally healthy workplace – Return on investment analysis’, was conducted for Beyond Blue and the National Mental Health Commission and suggests businesses can earn a $2.30 return on investment for every dollar they spend on managing mental health. A copy of the report is available from Heads Up (www.headsup.org.au).

With the financial and productivity impacts of mental health in business, awareness is high and companies are no longer afraid to ignore the signs. Managing and preventing mental health problems in the workplace makes sense commercially and benefits worker wellbeing.

During 2014-2015, WorkCover Queensland received over 3,700 mental health claims and paid out over $45 million in compensation costs. More alarmingly, workers in the agriculture industry with mental health claims took on average, 98 days off work compared to 31 days for any other injury recovery timeframe in the industry.

That’s nearly three times longer and a huge impact on business productivity, especially for smaller businesses in rural communities where staff replacement is difficult given their remoteness.

Everyone has stress in their lives but people living and working in rural and remote communities are sometimes subjected to additional pressures due to isolation, limited employment opportunities and natural disasters such as drought, flood and fire. These additional pressures can often impact the mental health and wellbeing of individuals and lead to symptoms of anxiety, depression and suicide.

Three million Australians are living with anxiety and depression and while they’re different conditions, it is not uncommon for them to occur at the same time. Over half of those who experience depression also experience anxiety and people with these conditions are more likely to attempt suicide than other people.

Just as we seek medical advice and support for physical illness such as heart disease and diabetes, we need to do the same when our mental health is suffering. People with poor mental health are more prone to injury and poor physical health, and people with poor physical health such as diabetes and heart disease can suffer from poor mental health.

Employment is good for our health and working in a healthy workplace can lead to increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, staff retention and good team morale.

What can you do to enhance your own mental wellbeing?

• Get regular exercise – it reduces stress, increases energy and promotes better sleep.
• Eat a healthy, balanced diet – give your body nourishment.
• Moderate your alcohol consumption and include alcohol free days in each week.
• Get enough sleep for your body to work safely and efficiently.
• Take time to relax, spend time with family and friends, do something for you – set aside time for activities or projects you enjoy.
• If you are not feeling well, talk about it and seek help early, including ringing Lifeline on 13 11 14 or getting support from church, sports or community groups and friends and family.

How employers can promote a healthier, happier, more productive workplace

• Integrate health and wellbeing programs into safety management systems to ensure workplace systems and processes support workers.
• Consult workers on the positive and negative aspects of their work that may be impacting their health and how workplace processes can be improved.
• Look at the way work is organised to ensure adequate work breaks and, where practicable, allow some flexibility in the time of breaks.
• Provide sufficient time for workers to undertake the work assigned, provide information to enable workers to perform work competently, and provide suitable equipment which is appropriately maintained.
• Educate workers on how to be mentally healthy and where to get support if they or a work colleague are not doing too well.
• Support open communication and encourage workers to share their concerns about work related stressors at an early stage.
• Promote and provide an employee assistance service that responds to individual issues or concerns, both work and non-work related.

There are many resources and initiatives available to employers and managers to help better identify, manage and prevent mental illness in the workplace.

Below are some useful links and contact numbers for support:

• Beyond Blue Workplace and Workforce program www.beyondblue.org.au
• Heads up – a beyondblue initiative www.headsup.org.au
• Lifeline Rural Mental Health www.lifeline.org.au
• State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia report (TNS research) available from Heads up
• Farmer health poster to promote good health behaviours for your workers www.aghealth.org.au

Welcome to Beeftalk 46

Rural areas have some of the lowest rates of mental health illness in the country. However, life in rural areas can be challenging and stressful. Mental health issues can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender or background. It is important to recognise the signs of mental health issues and seek support when needed.

While mental health issues can be difficult to talk about, it is important to remember that help is available. Overcoming mental health issues can be challenging, but with the right support and resources, recovery is possible.

Resources and services available to support people living in rural areas include:

- beyondblue www.beyondblue.org.au
- Heads up www.headsup.org.au
- Lifeline www.lifeline.org.au
- State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia report (TNS research) available from Heads up
- Farmer health poster to promote good health behaviours for your workers www.aghealth.org.au

For more information, visit beyondblue.org.au

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Drive.com.au
New biosecurity laws for livestock producers

Biosecurity Queensland is urging livestock producers to be aware of the new biosecurity laws and what they mean for their business. Queensland’s new Biosecurity Act 2014 commenced on 1 July 2016.

A new cattle tick framework commenced on 1 July 2016. It provides producers with more options for managing cattle tick on their property. The framework supports reduced travel times and costs for producers impacted by cattle tick and provides more flexibility for low risk activities such as moving livestock to feedlots and abattoirs.

It also allows for accredited certifiers – people trained to inspect and certify livestock as free from ticks. Accredited certifiers can issue certificates at any location, not just a dip or clearing facility. This allows livestock to be certified at their place of origin and moved directly to their destination, saving the producer additional loading, travel and costs.

All producers still have an obligation to report cattle tick and tick fever in the free zone. Infested properties in the free zone need to ensure their livestock are tick free before they are moved and eradicate the ticks from their property. Biologically Queensland continues to provide surveillance for cattle ticks in the free zone to identify and monitor high risk areas, and to ensure that eradication programs on infested properties are effective.

The property identification code (PIC) system is continuing. If you keep designated animals, you are a considered a registrable biosecurity entity and must register your details with Biologically Queensland. This is similar to the previous property registration requirements – the terminology of who must register is a little different, but what is considered a designated animal remains unchanged.

You must register if you keep:

- One or more cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, bison, buffaloes, deer, members of the camel family, members of the equine family
- 100 or more designated birds – those that are raised for human consumption (poultry) or the production of eggs for human consumption (e.g., chickens), or that have been released into free flight since they started being kept in captivity (e.g. racing pigeons)
- One or more bee hives.

In most cases the owner of the animals needs to register because they normally have ultimate care and control of the animals. If you keep livestock, when you register as a biosecurity entity a PIC will be issued. If you already held a PIC you were automatically registered as a biosecurity entity on 1 July 2016 and registration will remain effective for three years.

A major theme of the new laws is that of shared responsibility – that everyone is responsible for managing their own biosecurity risks. The laws introduce the general biosecurity obligation, meaning livestock producers must take an active role in managing biosecurity risks under their control and must ensure their actions do not spread plant and animal pests, diseases or contaminants.

You are not expected to know about all types of pests and diseases, however you are expected to know about those that you could potentially come across as part of your daily activities. You need to ensure you can recognise and manage the various pest animal and plant species present in your area. Under the Act, and as part of your general biosecurity obligation, you must take specific actions to limit the spread and impact of these pests, known as restricted matter, by reducing, controlling or containing them. You must not share, sell, trade or release restricted matter into the environment unless you are authorised to do so in a regulation or under a permit.

There are also new reporting requirements and restrictions on the movement of some restricted matter in newly introduced biosecurity zones. These zones can be specific to the type of restricted matter being managed, for example red imported fire ants and biosecurity zones and horticultural biosecurity zones.

To find out more about your responsibilities visit www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au or call 13 25 23.

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Repronomics™- enabling genetic improvement in tropically adapted beef cattle

Low reproductive rates in northern Australian beef herds are recognised as a significant limiting factor to enterprise productivity. Many factors influence reproductive rates, in particular environmental and management factors.

Better management of these animal environment influences play an integral part in increasing productivity, however having very small and increasingly accurate methods of genetic selection will provide the opportunity to further influence the rate of genetic industry and increase enterprise productivity and viability.

The collaborative, five-year Meat & Livestock Australia funded project aims to improve the evaluation of animals within industry for a number of economically important performance traits, in particular female fertility. The collaborative partners are the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries’ Agri-Science Queensland, University of New England’s Animal Genetics and Breeding Unit (AAGB), and the Northern Territory Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries (NDPIF).

The key component in the evaluation is the combination of strategic phenotypic recording and new, high density SNP (Single Nucleotide Polymorphism) genotyping of well controlled, specifically managed cattle to rapidly increase the accuracy of genetically describing the reproductive merit of tropically adapted beef cattle. The data collected through this study will also be used to seed the new genetic analysis methodology of estimating breeding values for all traits.

To date phenotypic data has been collected on ~2000 hd of female cattle across DAF Supergirl and Brian Pastures Research Facilities. These females represent progeny of ~160 sires from ~60 studs. An important element of the project is creating and maintaining genetic linkage between research sites with 28 sires common to both Brian Pastures and Supergirls. The NT DPIF’s Douglas Daily Research Station’s Brahman selection line herd also plays a significant role in this research with a number of common sires being used.

The benefits of this research are further enhanced through strategic links to industry seedstock herds. This has been achieved through successful large scale artificial breeding programs over the past two years using highly influential bulls within the Brahman, Droughtmaster and Santa Gertrudis breeds.

In addition to the specific project outcomes a partnership with the Australian Brahman Breeders Association, Droughtmaster Stud Breeders’ Society and a consortium of Santa Gertrudis Research Herds has continued to develop whereby steer progeny from the project are supplied to these industry groups who have secured MLA Donor Company funding to evaluate further growth, carcass and meat quality traits with all data being integrated into project analyses.

The overall outcome will be increased accuracy of estimated breeding values (EBVs) for female reproduction and other performance traits, particularly for young bulls. Higher accuracy EBVs will allow more informed purchasing and breeding decisions by commercial cattle producers, and importantly, enable significantly faster rates of genetic progress in the seedstock sector effectively ‘stocking the shelves’ with young animals whose genetic merit for a raft of traits is more accurately described.

The net result of this research will be to enable industry to rapidly increase performance and productivity of the northern Australia beef herd.

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Indian couch moves south

Indian couch or Indian bluegrass (Baltichloea perfoliata) is a pasture grass known more widely in northern Queensland however in the last few years it is being seen more commonly along roadways in southern areas of the state.

In central Queensland, Indian couch is outcompeting improved pasture species such as Buffalo grass and productive native species. It has the ability to adversely affect productivity of these better grass species.

Information from 16 grazing monitoring sites in North Queensland indicates that while there was no Indian couch in 1995, all sites had the grass in 2014.

Indian couch is a very drought-hardy plant growing within an annual rainfall range of 500-800 mm. It has similar attributes and soil requirements to creeping bluegrass. Indian couch spreads by stolons and is also a prolific seeder.

It grows to between 50 and 90 centimetres high, the leaf blades are greyish green and two to six mm wide. On moist roadsides the regrowth of stems has a distinct red tinge. The seed head is purplish in colour and has a distinct odour when crushed which is typical of many Baltichloea species.

The tops and stolons of the grass will be killed by frosts but it can recover from the crowns. Typically, in winter, it will break down quickly leaving soils bare and exposed if they have been heavily grazed.

Over the years there have been many selected lines of Indian couch that have been used for pasture and lawns. As such, there is great variety in the productive capability of the grass for grazing.

Bowen is the least vigorous, earliest flowering, but hardy and invasive of native pasture. Medoway is intermediate and the most productive, while Yeppoon is a later flowering, leafy strain.

Dawson creeping bluegrass is a low-growing, late-flowering line used for lawns, road sides and soil conservation purposes. In poor soils it can be a productive option but on heavier soils there are far better native and introduced grasses that are favoured.

Typically, Indian couch will invade disturbed soils or heavily overgrazed paddocks as it is very resilient to high grazing pressure. It is a very successful invader of pasture due to its ability to grow in low fertility soils and survive heavy grazing. Generally, the grass is palatable to stock but can be less attractive after flowering.

In summary, Indian couch is a grass that can be productive on light soils, however, it has the ability to invade better pastures and be less productive. It is worth watching out for and unless you have very poor soil types there are more suitable and productive pasture species to grow.

You can find out more about Indian couch on the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries website (www.daf.qld.gov.au), Tropical Forages (www.tropicalforages.info) and AustGrass2 (www.ausgrass2.myspecies.info) websites.

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Leucaena rumen bug still going strong

Dr Athol Klee’s team found that only small changes in the bacterial composition had happened over the twenty years of producing the inoculum.

Team member Dr Carl Davis identified that there has actually only been one strain of S. jeneasi (the bacteria that breaks down the toxic) in the inoculum since fermentor-based production started.

In going back and testing historical samples, the team found that the levels of S. jeneasi in the inoculum had remained stable over the entire time of production.

When different production chain scenarios were tested it was determined that cryo-protecting and storing at -20°C had little effect on the viability of S. jeneasi and its ability to degrade the toxins 3,4-dihydroxy pyridone (3,4-DHP) and 2,3-dihydroxy pyridone (2,3-DHP).

Allowing the frozen inoculum to thaw and keeping it at 2-8°C for 30 hours had little effect on the survival of S. jeneasi and it was still able to effectively break down 3,4 and 2,3-DHP.

These findings suggest that reductions in S. jeneasi viability due to conditions along the supply chain are unlikely to impact on the overall ability of the inoculum to establish and maintain its activity in the animal’s rumen.

The final report for the project can be accessed on the MLA website: if you’d like to read it please visit www.btl.co.nz/2eZJ5S

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We’re a digital nation

95% of Australian households are online
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*Source: smartcompany.com.au
Taking the guesswork out of bull buying

If you’re in charge of bull buying within your business, it’s important to realise that your selections will drive the direction of your herd and influence your profitability for the next 10 to 15 years.

With this in mind, wouldn’t you want to use tools available that can assist you to make more informed, objective decisions? Unfortunately some think not. There are still producers spending large sums of money on bulls based purely on their looks alone and this can be an expensive gamble.

In purchasing a bull, you’re really simply buying a package of genes. In order to be able to pass on these genetics however, first and foremost requires the bull to be fertile.

As some may be aware, a veterinary bull breeding soundness evaluation (BBSE), or recently developed BULLCHECK™, is a tool available which identifies risk factors for a bull’s potential to be fertile in the future using a set of standards developed by the Australia Cattle Veterinarians (ACV).

As part of the evaluation, a bull’s identification and history is recorded, and then an assessment is undertaken which may include the following five key components: scrotal circumference measurement, general physical evaluation and examination of the reproductive tract; serving ability assessment; crush side semen assessment and finally, semen morphology. It is recommended that you request from the seedstock producer a BULLCHECK report for each bull you are interested in prior to purchase. If you do so, you’ll then know the level of risk associated with using a particular bull for a particular purpose.

Every time you’re looking to make a purchase, be sure to relook at your breeding objectives so that you’re reminded about where you’re heading and what traits you’re looking to place emphasis on. It’s important that the traits you’re selecting for are measurable, heritable, have variation in the trait and are of economic importance.

It’s hard to fathom why people keep paying such big money for traits that don’t put extra dollars in the back pocket. BREEDPLAN has been in existence now in Australia for just over 30 years and produces Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs): a tool that can be used by seedstock and commercial producers to estimate an animal’s genetic merit for particular traits.

The number of traits available to assist with selection will depend on the particular breed in question, how many measurements have been recorded on the individual animal and its relatives, and linked traits. Traits generally fall under three broad categories: weight, fertility and carcase. The emphasis placed on individual traits will be determined by a buyer’s breeding objectives, however it is suggested that selection be based on a balance of traits and not purely focused on a single trait.

An EBV can be expressed as a positive, negative or zero figure. And it’s important to remember that negative figures don’t always denote undesirable. This is certainly the case for the significant fertility trait ‘Days to Calving’, where a more negative figure is highly desirable.

For those unaware, EBVs cannot be compared across breeds (e.g. Angus vs Charolais) and the EBVs of the bull/row you’re looking to purchase or retain in your herd should be compared against the current breed average, which at present is the average for 2014 born calves.

To look up EBVs you can either visit the BREEDPLAN website directly or go through the breed society websites. Here you can find out useful information about how the bull you’re looking to buy really stacks up across the varying traits, when his mother first calved and how many calves she has had and when, and if genetics conditions are of concern etc.

Many sale catalogues can also be viewed online and there in the ability to use a search/ sort function to quickly identify those animals that are suitable for your requirements. Within minutes you can cut a sale catalogue from let’s say 120 bulls down to 20 by simply entering in minimum/maximum figures you wish to see for certain traits. This will save you a lot of time and money, allowing you to focus on what bulls genetically will improve your bottom line.

If you’re genuinely dedicated to taking your herd forward in the right direction, then you need to make the most of tools such as BULLCHECK and EBVs, as they significantly minimise the guesswork and reduce risk. Once you’ve got your head around how to use these tools effectively and see the results in the paddock, you’ll wonder why you weren’t on the bandwagon earlier.

Timing is everything and right now you have the power to make positive changes this coming bull buying season. This is the time to act — review your breeding objectives, spend the time doing your homework, identify those seedstock producers going the extra distance to provide you with all the information required, evaluate your current and potential sites and be sure to ask for assistance if required.

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Strategic management boosts Mitchell grass recovery post drought

After four years of drought, the most common question western Queensland based scientist David Phelps gets asked isn’t about rain, it’s about grass and it’s asked anxiously.

The Longreach Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) principal scientist said one of the biggest concerns for western landholders was whether Mitchell grass would recover after the prolonged dry.

“The Longreach Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) principal scientist said one of the biggest concerns for western landholders was whether Mitchell grass would recover after the prolonged dry.

Dr David Phelps then the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Longreach believes Mitchell grass will recover from drought with strategic management.

Speaking at a Leading Sheep restocking forum in Longreach he offered sheep and wool growers historical evidence indicating the resilience of the native pasture, but explained good management would play a critical role in its recovery.

“People can be optimistic that their Mitchell grass pastures will recover with rain, even though there may be losses due to a prolonged period of low rainfall and high evaporation,” Dr Phelps said.

“But how well pastures come back will depend on how long they are rested or spelled as they start growing after rain.”

Dr Phelps said restocking forum in Longreach he offered sheep and wool growers historical evidence indicating the resilience of the native pasture, but explained good management would play a critical role in its recovery.

“People can be optimistic that their Mitchell grass pastures will recover with rain, even though there may be losses due to a prolonged period of low rainfall and high evaporation,” Dr Phelps said.

“But how well pastures come back will depend on how long they are rested or spelled as they start growing after rain.”

Given relief rain has been sporadic through western Queensland and much of the region remained drought-affected his talk to Leading Sheep producers had two aspects: estimating critical feed budgets for those with sheep still in paddocks, and spelling country for those who had destocked.

“Accurately estimating what feed you have available is critical, especially when it’s very dry and your pasture management is challenged,” Dr Phelps said.

“Accurately estimating what feed you have available is critical, especially when it’s very dry and your pasture management is challenged,” Dr Phelps said.

“Ideally with Mitchell grass you should not graze (alive) tussocks below 15 cm, because the taller the plant the more responsive it is to rain.”

“For example if you have 15 cm stubble it will respond with fresh leaf along the stalk, if you get just 25-50 mm of rain.”

“If you graze Mitchell grass right to ground level, it is more susceptible to dying and will need 100-150 mm of rain to get a real response.”

For those producers fortunate enough to have had rain are now preparing to bring stock back from agistment, Dr Phelps urged them to try to spell Mitchell grass for a minimum of six weeks before restocking.

“I understand the financial pressure and it’s a tough situation to be in, because agistment is expensive but if you can give your country 6-12 weeks to recover it will work better for your long-term pastoral values.”

If daytime temperatures were around 30 degrees and the nights were above 12 degrees then rain would benefit the predominately summer growing grass.

“In 2007 we had 4-6 inches (100-150 mm) of general rain in June and mild temperatures for a fortnight and the Mitchell grass responded incredibly,” Dr Phelps said.

“Is an extraordinarily resilient grass, individual plants can live for 20 to 30 years, so the more you look after it in the good years, the better it will see you through the dry.”

He said historical data from the millennium drought between 2001 and 2008 showed Mitchell grass country, which had been spelled during summer, had a better response to rain, than even areas that had been lightly stocked.

Wet season spelling should ideally be for a minimum of six weeks, but pasture that was struggling to respond could need 4-5 months’ rest.

“If you give it time and rest it will usually recover. The other question I have been asked is: it’s worth pulling out Mitchell grass seed? My advice is save your money,” he said.

“Trials in the 1990s found there was more Mitchell grass seed in the soil than we could commercially put out, so it really is about managing your country so it has a chance to recover. Ideally you will have at least one Mitchell grass plant every square metre, but as few as 12 or so Mitchell plants in a hectare can produce the equivalent of commercial sowing rates. Taking good care of those isolated plants can save you hundreds of thousands of dollars in sowing costs.”

“Yes there will be tussocks in the paddock that are dead, but there will also be Mitchell grass that survives and that’s what makes it such a valuable pasture.”

Top 5 tips for Mitchell grass management

1. Give pasture a minimum of six weeks, and ideally 12 weeks, to spell after rain and before restocking.

2. Ideally Mitchell grass tussocks should not be grazed below 15 cm – the taller the plant the more responsive it is to rain.

3. If you have 15 cm stubble it will respond with fresh leaf along the stalk, with just 25-50 mm of rain.

4. If Mitchell grass is grazed to ground level, it is more susceptible to dying and will need 100-150 mm of rain to get a response.

5. Annual wet season spelling should be for a minimum of six weeks, but pasture that is struggling to recover could need 4-5 months’ rest.

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Making grass budgets a base for business

Traditionally, Dave Owens has described himself as a ‘wool grower’, but he says today it would be more accurate to say he was in the ‘Mitchell grass’ business.

A seventh generation landholder, Mr Owens runs a 15,500 ha sheep and wool operation at Somerset, a grazing property 70 km south east of Longreach in western Queensland.

“Longreach produces keen grass enthusiasts, who are always ready to try new things, but over time the Mitchell grass has become an important part of our operation. It’s a resilient grass that can survive tough conditions.”

For him, a run of dry seasons, coupled with the predation challenges of wild dogs, the grazing pressure of kangaroos and a volatile wool market forced him to reassess his operational approach. This brought him face to face with the base element of his business: grass and land condition.

“The average rainfall here is about 14-15 inches and we had that in 2014, but last year we measured less than half that, so early on I knew I was in trouble grass-wise,” Mr Owens said.

“I was forced to start feeding lambs ewes and while I’m accustomed to supplementary feeding in late August/September I couldn’t afford to feed from May so I had to sell, completely destock, it was a tough decision, but I knew it was the right one for my country.”

He said the decision was made easier and significantly less stressful by the fact he knew the feed budget figures wouldn’t stack up.

“It gave me hard data to work with instead of emotion, I could look ahead and see the implications of my actions on my finances and importantly on my Mitchell grass in the long-term,” Mr Owens said.

“In my case the Mitchell grass was about 15 cm high from the rain at the start of the year. So as soon as the end of March came I knew that I had to enter into a destocking program.

“Agriculture has always been considered a bit of a gamble and there are still elements you can’t control like the weather, but the fact is we now have the capacity to put some hard data around feed budgets and stock number mixes. It empowers you when it comes to making management decisions.

“It has allowed me to see how and what I need to do in terms of stock rates, down to specific paddocks, to manage my grass for the long-term, because it is the basis of my operation.”

Rain earlier this year has allowed Mr Owens to buy sheep in to restock his country; he is now running around 3000 young merino ewes on a property with carrying capacity of 7000 dry sheep equivalent (DSE).

He said he was surprised by how his country responded once it rained.

“This year I have been very impressed by the response from the rainfall events. I have had about 30 per cent mortality in the Mitchell grass tussocks overall, but the ones that survived have responded tremendously to the 150 mm (6 inches) in three falls.”

He works on splitting the majority of his country for 14-16 weeks during the wet season, but admits it isn’t always possible to give pasture such an extended break. But he believes feeding or spelling country has paid dividends in terms of the Mitchell grass response this year.

“I am comfortable projected stocking numbers at the moment match our grass budgets, however I am also very conscious I currently have significant no pressure. Mr Owens said.

“So when I do my stock calculations I have to factor in an additional 3000 DSE animals, because I estimated (based on paddock counts and local environmental figures) there are between 5000-6000 tussocks on Somerset at the moment.

“It is the downside of being one of the few places to get reasonable rain in a very large area, but that’s where feeding budgets allow you to get a realistic idea of what you really have available in the paddock.”

He admits calculating feed budgets can be a complex task, but he believes working through the figures becomes easier with practice.

“The information that you need to collect to do a feed budget is quite involved, but it’s all down to the quality of the soil and the quality of the grass, in particular, land type areas. Then the amount of your annual grasses and the amount of unpalatable types,” Mr Owens explained.

“This all goes into a calculation and you decide how much you need to leave to maintain pasture and land condition and gives you an amount of kilograms of dry matter that can be used for grazing.”

Despite the situational challenges facing his enterprise and the sheep and wool industry in general, the 33-year-old landholder is optimistic about the future of agriculture.

“My immediate plan is to stay in the sheep industry, it is what this country is best suited for,” he explained.

“Yes we have had some issues with wild dogs, in the worst affected paddocks I lost 50 per cent of my lambs. But now I have a 14 km dog fence with one neighbour and we are looking to do more exclusion fencing this year, so I am confident that will make a significant difference to the dog pressure.”

“Overall I think, what makes it easier to determine the direction your business should be taking, or whether it really is worth doing, are the facts and figures available now for individual grazing enterprises.

“For me personally, the more science and data available, the better tools I have to make decisions about managing grass and land condition. These two things are first and foremost in a grazing business like mine.”

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Women Land High Tea
Saturday, 3rd September 2016
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25% of the High Tea ticket sales will be donated to Dinogrid Angelina and responsibilities for leases, damages, costs and other consequences resulting directly from or in connection with the information contained herein.