

# Maintaining pasture supply through wet season spelling

Rainsby, Aramac

## BACKGROUND

Rainsby is 22,660 ha of black gidgee and spinifex country half-way between Torrens Creek and Aramac. It is about 300 km from the major selling centres of Charters Towers, Blackall and Longreach. Bill and Diane Alford moved to Rainsby in 1998 after spending most of their management career in the Charter's Towers district. They lease a second property near Mingela from another family member and run it as part of their overall enterprise.

## Livestock enterprises

Bill and Diane's breeder herd is based on Brahman and Brahman composite cattle. The breeders are equally divided between their two properties, whilst their progeny are grown out on Rainsby. The breeders are rotated through eight paddocks dedicated to wet season spelling. Control mating is conducted from Christmas to July and calves early weaned to maximise the opportunity for cows to re-cycle and produce a calf every year. Weaners are supplemented with molasses and dry lick to boost productivity and survival during the dry season. They prefer to conduct three musters during the year, tying in with early weaning:

- April—to wean the majority of calves and to brand the late calves
- July—to wean the late calves and to pregnancy test
- Christmas—to start branding.

Two-thirds of the male progeny are grown through to light fats and marketed direct to meat-works in Townsville. The remainder are sold as stores through northern saleyards. Heifers are culled on temperament and fertility. Cattle are sold into more southern markets if there is a 20c/kg premium or through AuctionsPlus when appropriate; other wise Bill and Diane prefer to support the northern market and to benefit from lower transport and handling costs.



*Discussing the benefits of spelling on Rainsby*

## Natural resources

Average annual rainfall on Rainsby is 450 to 500 mm, with the high variability typical of western Queensland. Rainsby is two-thirds black gidgee country, with the remainder spinifex with gravelly-ridges or sandy soils. There is some frontage country along Torrens Creek, which splits the property in two. Their most productive country is open scrub.

## Infrastructure

Bill and Dianne have divided two of the original 4,000 ha paddocks of Rainsby into eight for their rotational wet season spelling programme. Five of these paddocks are 600-800 ha in size whilst the other three are larger to ensure cattle have access to enough high-ground during a flood without damaging the pasture. With Torrens Creek splitting the property in two, Bill and Diane had to adapt Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry recommendations to suit their own circumstance. Three of the 14 paddocks on Rainsby remain as larger weaner paddocks which are spelled every second year—or more often as opportunities arise.

Water is a combination of natural surface water and water holes in Torrens Creek subsequent to the wet season and bore water. Each paddock

has at least one water point piped from the bore, located to promote even grazing pressure. Further water points are planned for the future.

## Stocking Rate management

Rainsby can carry about 1,000 head and Bill prefers a conservative approach to stocking. Stock numbers in each paddock are based on his estimates of pasture availability and using his experience from previous seasons as a benchmark.

## Wet Season Spelling

Bill and Diane attended a DAFF *EDGEnetwork* Grazing Land Management course in 2007 and have adapted the key messages to suit their situation—especially the importance of spelling country and adopting conservative stock numbers to help improve land condition.

Bill and Diane regard feed coverage as the most important aspect of their approach to property management, preferring to ensure there is enough feed for the current number of animals and to give a buffer ready to cover the hard times.

Their eight wet-season spelling paddock are divided into two groups of four, running two separate breeder herds. Cattle are moved four times a year to preserve land condition, improve pasture utilisation and spread the grazing pressure.

The timing of stock movement depends on ensuring a reserve of pasture in the currently grazed paddock, where the rain has fallen and how well diet quality is being maintained. Bill uses the height of Mitchell grass plants as a key indicator, ensuring plants are not grazed below 15-20 cm stubble height. He also considers the health of the perennial grasses and the abundance of annuals—if the perennials are healthy then the annuals can be grazed more heavily without risking damage to the longer-lived grasses.

Six of the rotation paddocks are subject to flooding. As a result the two paddocks which do not flood tend to be grazed every wet season. To maintain land condition in these paddocks, Bill

ensures they are rested later in the wet season—generally over February and March—to allow the pasture to take advantage of storm rain.

The weaner paddocks which are not part of the rotational system are also spelled. 'We try to spell these on alternate years' Bill advised—especially the ones that have high ground and are used during floods. Weaners are grazed in the rotational paddocks when necessary to spell the weaner paddocks, as long as there is enough feed left for the breeders.

According to Bill and Diane there are real benefits in giving country a rest 'we would always prefer to spell country—even for a short time—rather than not at all'.

## Other issues

Other challenges for Bill and Diane include weeds—with *Parkinsonia* on Rainsby and Chinese apple, rubber vine and lantana on their Mingela property—which they dedicate 1-2 months per year to controlling.

For the future Bill aims to install more waters, update aging fencing and ensure the country and cattle are in good shape to hand onto the next generation.

## For more information

For more information about grazing management you can:

- Attend a Stocktake pasture monitoring course
- Attend an *EDGEnetwork* Grazing Land Management workshop
- Contact your local DAFF FutureBeef extension Officer on 13 25 23 or [beef@deedi.qld.gov.au](mailto:beef@deedi.qld.gov.au)
- Visit the FutureBeef website <http://futurebeef.com.au/> for more case studies, fact sheets, videos and information.

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