

Rural Weekly ^{\$Priceless}

Central Queensland Edition

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GRAZIER Graeme McDonald, "Albeni", near Springsure, discusses his grazing management system in the paddock on Monday at a CQ Best Practice Group field day that attracted 130 participants.

READ ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF ROTATION IN OUR SPECIAL FEATURE ON PAGES 4-5.

Picture: DANIEL BURDON ROK220211day-d5



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Give it a rest: Rotating



Property owner Graeme McDonald speaks on Monday to the 130-strong crowd about his management methods. ROK220211day-d1

By DANIEL BURDON

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LEAVING pastures to rest for up to 360 days a year may seem like a waste to some – but a cattle producer west of Springsure is seeing the benefits of resting his paddocks as part of a rotational grazing system.

Cattle producers Graeme and Susan McDonald run “Albeni”, a 16,000-hectare (40,000-acre) property about 140km west of Springsure. The property has buffel grass pastures, with some native bluegrasses, on a mix of Brigalow clay and ironbark forest country.

The McDonalds hosted more than 100 graziers at “Albeni” for a field day on Monday, discussing how they became involved in rotational grazing and what benefits they have seen in keeping cattle moving over small paddocks of pasture, allowing the grasses to continually regrow.

Members of the Central Queensland Best Practice Group, the McDonalds were once great advocates of blade-ploughing but, in the 11 years since the property was last ploughed, they have been

‘ Everything is rotating at different speeds ... ’

focused on establishing the new grazing system and last year also gained organic status.

The property has been split into five main paddock areas, with the Red Roo and Devil’s Elbow paddocks the main focus of the field day. Mr McDonald said the Red Roo-Devil’s Elbow area totalled 2112ha, split into several paddocks ranging from 25 hectares to 70.

He said more than 900 breeders and calves were run in paddocks of about 25ha, rotated about every couple of days between similar-sized paddocks.

“Everything is rotating at different speeds; the worst grazed country we have is probably rested about 250 days a year, with the best rested for a full 360 days each year. Basically, we have a revolving door between the paddocks, where we combine long periods of resting pastures with very short periods of high-impact grazing.”

Mr McDonald said he had been

running the rotational grazing system since 1994 and, on a property with highly variable rainfall, he aimed to have at least 80% ground-cover in dry periods.

Both Mr McDonald and grazing specialist Mick Alexander said the grazing system was all about the “rate of growth” of pastures.

Mr Alexander said pastures grew in three main phases: The first when the plant is drawing its energy from its roots and it must be rested; phase two is the critical time when the plant is getting its energy from the sun, feeding the soil; and phase three is its dormant stage, when the pasture is lower in protein.

“The whole concept is that pastures are grazed in phases two or three, when the pastures are able to cope with being intensively grazed for a short period of time and still recover,” he said.

“Part of the rotational grazing system developed here also en-

Committed: That’s all

NEARLY two months after floods devastated much of Central Queensland, calls from farming groups and the State Government for increased Federal help have not been answered.

While the National Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements have activated Category D assistance for some local government areas affected by Cyclone Yasi, AgForce, the Queensland Farmers’ Federation and Queensland Dairyfarmers’ Organisation still wait for an increase.

If activated for shires in Central Queensland, it would mean producers could access special concessional loans of up to \$650,000, grants of up to \$50,000 and wage assistance for up to 13 weeks.

A spokeswoman for Minister for Agriculture Tim Mulherin said he had requested that the Category D assistance be extended beyond the already-declared areas.

Both the QFF and AgForce have been requesting the higher levels of help for nearly two months, for shires including Central Highlands, Banana, Lockyer Valley and the Darling Downs.

AgForce vice-president Ian Burnett, touring Cyclone Yasi-affected areas with Mr Mulherin, said: “We are still waiting for a sign that the Federal Government has the

best interests of rural and regional Queensland at heart – the failure to underpin recovery efforts with a real commitment to the long-term sustainability of the vital agricultural industry is nothing short of disappointing.”

Federal Minister for Queensland Floods Recovery Senator Joe Ludwig made this announcement, built on the Cyclone Yasi support package announced by the Deputy Prime Minister last week:

“The Federal Government understands that the scope of Cyclone Yasi is widespread and has impacted inland communities in North Queensland.

“As the majority funder of natural disaster relief and recovery arrangements, the Gillard Government is committed to supporting Queensland as it rebuilds following Cyclone Yasi.

“The Commonwealth has already supported individuals directly in North Queensland through the payment of over \$252 million in Australian Government Disaster Relief Payments. Further, \$1.7 million has been paid to eligible individuals through the Disaster Income Relief Subsidy.

“The Gillard Government remains committed to supporting the Queensland recovery effort for the long term.”



CQ Best Practice Group members listen to Graeme McDonald at “Albeni”, near Springsure. ROK220211day-d7

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Long wait for action



BIG DAY: Participants at the CQ Best Practice Group field day at Graeme and Susan McDonald's "Albeni" on Monday. DANIEL BURDON ROK220211day-d6

sure that enough pastures are fully rested by the time winter comes around, that you have plenty of phase two grass, with high protein, to get through that period when a lot of other grass is starting to hay off."

While all the cattle movement might sound like a lot of mustering work is being done, Mr McDonald said he ran a fairly "relaxed" property.

"We have the paddocks configured so that there is a four-way gate around a central watering point, while another watering point is at the opposite corner of the paddock the cattle are in," Mr McDonald said. "When we want them to move, we simply turn off the water in the far corner, turn the water on at the central watering point and open the electric fence, so the cattle can make their own way to the next paddock."

"This gives the breeders plenty of time to graze through and head to the better pasture in the next paddock and also go around and pick up any calves in their own time, so no calves are left behind."

"We simply go through a day or two later, check the paddock and shut the gate behind them."

The central watering points are simply a two-line electric fence stretched between four large fenceposts, creating a square area around the trough in the centre.

“ I stay away from calling it cell grazing. I call it managed intensive grazing ”

The fences can be opened to allow cattle through, to have a drink and move to the next paddock.

While Mr McDonald was keen to show the benefits of the system, he said it could not work in large set stocked paddocks and had to be used on a more regular rotational system between smaller paddocks, ideally about 25ha in size.

Questions were asked on the day about whether the system the McDonalds were using was rotational or cell grazing. Mr McDonald said it was technically a cell grazing system, as cattle movements were based on the rate of growth of pastures, whereas a traditional rotational system based movements on the calendar year.

Mr McDonald said the system helped plan for winter and when to buy or sell cattle in dry times.

"I stay away from calling it cell grazing. I call it managed intensive grazing, as I am simply getting the cattle to move on once they've grazed an area, to extend the rest period for the grass," he said. "If you do this, you can predict how much more time you

might have until pastures need resting, so you can say I've got 120 days left, so that means I need to rest this much pasture for that amount of time and then we will get through a dry period like winter."

"It is all about fixing carbon back into the soil to benefit the grass."

"What you are seeing up here (above the surface) is only half of what is really happening, so you need to make sure that cattle are just grazing the tips of the grass and moving on."

"Not only does that ensure your pasture will regenerate but it also prevents seeding, which keeps the grass healthy and full of protein for the cattle."

"And keeping the paddocks small with water close by means you aren't losing any weight gained by them walking miles to get water."

Keeping so many breeders with their calves in such a small paddock also prevents many wild dog attacks, Mr McDonald said.

"I think we've found that having

a big mob of cattle in a small area means dingoes and wild dogs are much less likely to try and take on a big mob of cattle for one calf.

"There may also be an added benefit for us – that the dingoes are off elsewhere, hunting kangaroos and other pests – so we have it pretty good both ways."

While the current configuration of paddock shapes and watering points is working better than previous models the McDonalds have tried, it is by no means the last.

"I think it's working well, certainly the pastures are much healthier where we are practising these methods but I am continually thinking about how we can do it better, improving on what we've already learnt," Mr McDonald said. "It can be a decent outlay for the fences and watering points but I think you make it back on how many head you can actually run and, even if you fenced the paddocks and put in the troughs, it is of no use if you don't use the right grazing management system."

As another producer said on the day: "The thing is; it works."

● The work on the McDonalds' property has been managed by the Central Highlands Regional Resources Use Planning Co-operative (CHRRUP) and Grazing Best-Prac and funded by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

IT HAS been nine months since a Senate inquiry into competition and pricing in the dairy industry was completed – and no action has been taken by the Federal Government on its recommendations.

As the February 28 deadline looms for submissions to a new Senate inquiry into the impacts of supermarket price decisions on the dairy industry, the chairman of the Senate Economics Reference Committee – which has handled both inquiries – is still waiting for a letter from the Government on what action will be taken on the last inquiry.

West Australian Senator Alan Eggleston chairs the committee which handled last year's inquiry. He believes manipulation of the retail price of fresh milk by supermarkets, as well as the imbalance of power between processors and dairy farmers, was a "real threat" to the viability of the industry".

The same committee is handling the current inquiry, a response to the move by Coles Supermarkets to drop the price of its home-branded milk to \$1 a litre, which was swiftly followed by Woolworths, Aldi and Franklins.

But 10 months after its previous report, none of its 16 recommendations have been followed up. They included that the ACCC provide "more accurate estimates of the proportions of the retail price of milk" by September last year and the ACCC conduct "further study into the implications of increasing shares of the grocery market being taken by the generic of the major supermarket chains".

A spokesperson from ACCC said it could not take action until the Federal Government told it to.

Senator Eggleston said: "The facts are that the dairy industry is vulnerable. This was highlighted in last year's inquiry and I, for one, am afraid ... we could all be drinking reconstituted Chinese milk powder in a few years."

Queensland Dairyfarmers' Organisation chief executive Adrian Peake said that last December he contacted the Federal Minister for Agriculture over what action was being taken on the last inquiry.

He was told the recommendations were "under consideration".

Central Queensland's only processing plant is run by Paul's Milk, owned by Parmalat.

The company said it could not publicly comment on any issues surrounding the milk price war.

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