

Growing better grass

Kirk Smith

There is a stack of poly pipe lying underneath the Smith's Charters Towers property, 55 kilometres of it and there is a lot more to come.

It's to supply the property's cattle with water because the paddocks are getting smaller.

Kirk has been on the property Dreghorn since 1963. He took over from his father two decades ago and his son will succeed him.



Dreghorn has about 30 large paddocks; the Smith family wants to double that. When you split paddocks up you need more water troughs and poly pipe to deliver water to the troughs.

Splitting up paddocks will allow areas to be rested for two months during the wet season.

The Smiths didn't return cattle from agistment immediately after rain in 1988. The positive effects of this first wet season spell could be seen years after. Since then the Smiths have been resting paddocks and Kirk says they've noticed significant changes.

"We're able to maintain better ground cover and pasture mix. We're seeing the return of the better native grasses - the three p grasses, mainly Mitchell blue grass. We're also getting some black speargrass back. After we saw benefits of doing this we just wanted to keep doing it to be honest." Kirk said.

Improving the pasture and continually turning cattle into fresh paddocks has given the Smiths access to a lucrative market they could not access before. The pasture is supporting cattle that now have the weight for age that meets feedlot standards.

They sell most of their cattle at two years old at a higher value per kilo rate. Kirk said this wasn't achievable in the past.

He said it's taken a long time before the pasture could give them a return in production terms. In their case it was probably a 20 year cycle.

The family reduced the size of their herd a number of years ago. They forage budget to determine the carrying capacity, adjusting stocking rates as the year progresses.

Local natural resource management group NQ Dry Tropics allocated Reef Rescue funding to the Smiths for land type fencing materials, some poly piping and a tank to provide additional watering points. The Smiths paid for most of the improvements. Reef Rescue is part of the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country initiative.

Dreghorn falls into a priority region that was deemed to be in need of rehabilitation in order to reduce the sediment that runs off land and into rivers and ultimately into the Great Barrier Reef.

The property also has some gullies on it that will get bigger without intervention. The family has ideas about how to reduce the erosion. Kirk said, "We aim to take the energy out of the water and make it spread and go away slowly. We're trying to keep the water on the property so it doesn't run down the gullies."

They're doing this by changing the shape of the gullies and stopping water from concentrating at the lowest point. They also plan to seed all the disturbed ground.

Kirk said the erosion is caused in part by a landscape that's still changing due to a natural process. "In geological time the Burdekin is a young river, it's still cutting its way through the Great Dividing Range. As it cuts down the surrounding landscape weathers down with it. When we put cattle on the land it changes the dynamic and exacerbates the process. It is our intention to reduce our impact".

Kirk has a long association with looking after the land. He's been on the national and state Landcare councils and was the first chairman of NQ Dry Tropics.

"There's a time in your life when you can do the public stuff and get ideas out there and I think I've done that. Now my major focus is to pass that thinking on to the next generation and that's my son. He's bright and very smart and challenges me all the time but that's a healthy relationship! He understands what I'm on about." Kirk said.

Kirk's son Eiren believes grazing doesn't have a have a negative impact on the land – and in fact if done right he thinks it can have a positive impact.

There are times in the cattle cycle when you can't afford to spend on major infrastructure projects. Splitting the paddocks and providing more waters gives you the control to improve groundcover. Reef Rescue funding has helped bring those plans forward.

Further information contact communications@nqdrytropics.com.au



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