

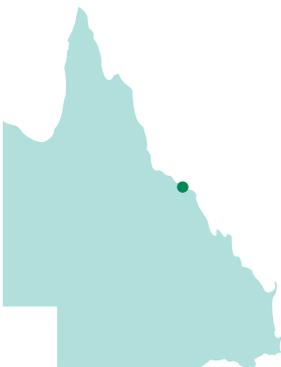
PROJECT PIONEER

CASE STUDY 2019

BRISTOW & UREISHA HUGHES
STRATHALBYN STATION, BOWEN

BRISTOW & UREISHA HUGHES

Improving the condition of grazing land has been at the heart of an ambitious five-year plan from a young Queensland couple, which has transformed the management of a sweeping 33,200 hectare beef cattle operation.



Bristow and Ureisha Hughes manage ‘Strathalbyn Station’ near Bowen, grazing around 6,500 head of breeding stock with Wagyu, Brahman and Red Poll genetics. The station has a mix of soil types and a diversity of grasses and legumes.

Close to the Great Barrier Reef, Strathalbyn Station is almost a catchment in its own right, with Bonnie Doon and King Creeks running through the property, along with 28 kilometres of Burdekin River frontage, all of which is bordered by mountain ranges.

The station is part of a larger grazing operation called ‘Wentworth Cattle Co’, working in conjunction with three other properties across Central Queensland that are owned by Bristow’s parents.

MANAGEMENT REIMAGINED

As a young farming family, Bristow and Ureisha, together with their two small children, brought to Strathalbyn an eagerness to learn and a willingness to question traditional on-farm practices. Bristow’s parents had worked with Resource Consulting Services (RCS) for around 25 years, and in 2016 Bristow and Ureisha signed on to Project Pioneer to build on these foundations.

The new approach built on strategic watering point placement, which had been underway since 2004, while a new fencing regime provided the extra ingredient needed to transform land utilisation and grazing.

“The big turning point for us was putting together a five-year plan allowing us to implement large-scale development strategies that have completely changed the way we graze, and the type of animals we graze – it’s a whole new way of looking at things,” Bristow said.

Key changes included the construction of 150 km of fence lines, laying 90 km of pipe, installing 60 troughs and 25 new tanks to create a dense network of watering points, which reduced grazing ‘hot spots’ and ensured more even distribution of grazing pressure.

“There was so much under-utilisation of parts of the property before and over-use in other areas, so we’ve basically been able to even out how we use the country, and this has allowed us to better care for the topsoil and the animals,” Bristow said.

Changes in the breed composition of the cattle run on Strathalbyn, high demand for Wagyu beef, good seasonal conditions up until 2017, and a strong cattle market in general has further accelerated on-farm improvements.

“Also of great benefit to our progress has been using all the resources available, including working more closely with scientists, external grants to help us access more knowledge and benchmarking information, all of which has helped to facilitate evidence-based decision making,” Bristow said.

“It’s critical as graziers that we work together with all stakeholders and take a holistic approach to everything we do. In doing this, we’ve also been able to protect the Great Barrier Reef. I think in the past, agriculture has been given a bad rap for its impact on the environment, but this shows we are closing the gap on that perception through these types of results.”



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One of the 25 new tanks installed to create a dense network of watering points, which reduce grazing ‘hot spots’ and ensure more even distribution of grazing pressure.

BETTER RESULTS THROUGH A NEW MINDSET

The results at Strathalbyn show that better environmental outcomes need not come at the expense of business objectives. Production has already increased by more than a quarter after just two years of a five-year implementation plan. Additional gains are expected as the transformation continues.

“We’ve gone from branding 3,500 calves to, in the last two years, branding 4,300 calves with significantly lower rainfall, and have increased the carrying capacity of the property by 1,500 head per year,” Bristow said.

“At the same time, we are having a positive impact on the Reef by boosting the ground cover of the whole property, and this has been achieved by increasing the number of paddocks and water points to allow us to better utilise some areas while resting others.

“Greater ground cover has also allowed us to heal small gullies and reduce run off dramatically, and we have significantly less sediment leaving the property which is very rewarding.”

As they reflect on the early wins from their new strategy, the Hughes see no limit on the gains that can be made to both production and environmental outcomes.

“In terms of the long-term benefits, I just don’t know where the ceiling is, but I can’t see there ever being a point where you stop looking for more ways to improve – it’s been a complete change of mindset,” Bristow said.

“We’re also now more resilient in the dry times and make better use of what we have in the good seasons, so we’re able to better look after our land.”

This change of mindset is evident across the entire business, and it’s reflected in all measures of performance.

“We have better financial literacy, a better understanding of how a business should be operated, better land, grass and animal management, an increase in branding rates and breeder retention through increased conception rates, and better use of nutritional insights,” Bristow said.

“We’re growing more grass and retaining ground cover, and for us that means making more money. “The better we can look after our land the better it will look after us.”

A HUMAN STORY

One of the surprising results of Project Pioneer has been the growth of staff capacity and their personal connection to the business as progress has unfolded. A clear plan has made employees and contractors feel part of the process and allowed them to celebrate in the positive changes and results.

“Our new management plan has really given people something to look forward to, and everyone feels a sense of accomplishment when we meet an end goal,” Bristow said.

“I believe we are definitely achieving more buy-in from employees, they’re excited to see how the land and animals have improved through the hard work they have contributed to the infrastructure improvements.”



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Key management strategies on ‘Strathalbyn Station’ have transformed land utilisation.

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A BIG FUTURE

As Bristow reflects on the rapid changes over the last three years, he can see further targets being hit over the coming years, by tapping into the key themes of managing and balancing grazing pressure, and increasing water efficiency.

“Three years ago, we had 14 main paddocks and four holding paddocks – now we have 49!” he said.

“Over the next five years I would expect to at least double that and, as a result, increase carrying capacity by another 1,500 head through better grazing management and land utilisation.

“Our long-term plan is to have 50,000 head by the time I am 50, so that obviously includes expansion beyond Strathalbyn. Our strategy is to invest in places that are underdeveloped and underutilised, and to implement our learnings and hands-on experience here to help the country realise its full potential.”



Funding through the Australian Government’s Reef Trust Phase III Investment Programme allows the delivery of “Project Pioneer – Innovation in Grazing Management”. This project aims to contribute to the delivery of the overarching Reef Trust Programme outcome of improving the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef from broad scale land use to increase the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef.

For further information on Project Pioneer, contact RCS:

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