

# PROJECT PIONEER

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CASE STUDY 2019



BRETT & PIP KRAFFT  
RAINBOW HILL, THANGOOL

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# BRETT & PIP KRAFFT

Striking the right balance between cattle stocking rates and carrying capacity while building groundcover is no easy feat, but it's a key goal one family of Central Queensland beef cattle producers is achieving.



Brett and Pip Krafft, of 'Rainbow Hill', Thangool, and their young daughters, run 500 head of breeding and trade cattle, targeting a turn-off weight of 400 kg to supply the feedlot sector predominantly.

Two years ago, the Kraffts signed on to participate in Project Pioneer – a groundbreaking collaboration between the Australian Government, Resource Consulting Services (RCS), WWF, CQUniversity, Maia Technology, Farm Map 4D and beef producers throughout Queensland's Great Barrier Reef catchments.

It's a decision that Brett and Pip say has helped them not only to identify a new direction for their business but also provided support to help them achieve those goals.

Good grazing management and optimising pasture use has been a focus for the Kraffts, as they set about making changes at 'Rainbow Hill' and another nearby property they run as one system, totalling 810 hectares.

For the Kraffts, the impact of those changes have been significant for their business and the landscape.

"We saw Project Pioneer as a great opportunity to create a viable business for us that would give us what we need as a family," Pip said.

"We were already aware of and admired RCS's principles and programs, so to have an opportunity to do the Executive Link program through Project Pioneer was fantastic.

"Improving grazing management and soil and water health was always high on our list of priorities, but being part of this program means we have been able to identify milestone targets and access new resources.

"We did not inherit an established family business and we're not part of a larger family operation, so we're basically starting from scratch. With debt financing it's not easy, so being able to access other resources and knowledge is very important. To be able to increase the scale of our operation, we needed the support that RCS and Project Pioneer provide."

## PATH TO CHANGE

Brett said the key to achieving their on-farm goals has been to undertake major water infrastructure and fencing improvements.

"We really ramped up splitting up our country, resting our country and trying to build a better soil profile, which leads to better groundcover," Brett said.

"Before we started the project, we were grazing half and resting half of our paddocks, and had five watering troughs. We mostly relied on dams and springs in the creek for stock water. We now have 90% of our paddocks resting at any time, and have installed an extra 18 troughs, which means our stock no longer use surface water.

"We've split up all our major paddocks and spread watering points more widely, enabling us to rest paddocks as we rotate our cattle.

"We always rotated our cattle but not to the degree that we are now. We're aiming for 100% groundcover at all times and to improve grass quantity and quality – the only way to do that is by resting paddocks and then adding livestock for short grazing periods.

"The landscape here is undulating with improved scrub soils and forest soils, and a mix of native grasses. When we first started Project Pioneer, we might have had 60% to 70% groundcover. We have improved that and maintained it through the dry period that we've experienced this year.

"We also have major creek systems running through the properties – some have permanent water holes and a few springs, but all of them feed into the Kariboe and Kroombit Creeks, which then flow into the Dawson River and eventually into the Fitzroy River, and then out into the Great Barrier Reef.

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Brett with one of the additional 18 water troughs that have been installed on 'Rainbow Hill'.



**“Resting paddocks is a big innovation – allowing the grass to recuperate, grow and respond. As a result, we have increased our long-term benchmark carrying capacity and we’re able to run more stock than we did five years ago.”**

*The Kraffts aim for 100% groundcover at all times and to improve grass quantity and quality.*

“One of the biggest impacts of the project is that it changes the way you look at things, especially water. I think we both comment now, when we see water running, what colour is it? How much soil is in it?”

“We noticed our dam starting to dry up, and I initially put it down to a series of dry years, when in fact we have improved our water infiltration. Water is staying on our land and that water retention is resulting in less run-off.”

Pip said their on-farm changes had also facilitated one of their biggest achievements - matching stocking rates to carrying capacity.

“It always seems like an obvious, foregone conclusion that beef producers are doing that, but it’s very hard to achieve,” Pip said.

“Although you have a long-term benchmark, the carrying capacity of your property changes constantly with seasonal conditions. If cattle numbers are static year after year, regardless of season, the land will end up degraded through overstocking, and the time it takes for land to recover from overstocking is usually at least two to three good seasons, if ever, which equals lost productivity to the business.

“Our goal is to match stocking rates to seasonal carrying capacity and we feel we’re doing that very well.

“Resting paddocks is a big innovation – allowing the grass to recuperate, grow and respond. As a result, we have increased our long-term benchmark carrying capacity and we’re able to run more stock than we did five years ago.

“As part of Project Pioneer, we have a subscription to the online grazing management tool ‘Maia Grazing’, which we use to record what we’re doing and plan ahead, to forecast and then make decisions.”

Having the right tools has given the Kraffts a greater feeling of control in an industry so reliant on the vagaries of weather and markets.

“We are constantly aware of where we are in terms of grass availability and seasonal conditions. We’re on top

of what’s happening right now and we forecast what’s likely to happen in the near future, according to different rainfall scenarios,” Pip said.

“We always have a couple of options up our sleeve as to which way we’ll go, depending on what plays out with weather conditions and markets.

“We feel we’re much more proactive than reactive now.”

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The path to change is rarely smooth, however, the ongoing support from RCS through Project Pioneer has been crucial for Brett and Pip.

“A big challenge for us is debt and financing. We haven’t overcome that but we have the resources to create a plan,” Pip said.

“We’ve been able to think outside the box and had opportunities through the project and externally that have enabled us both to access off-farm income.

“That enabled us to maintain the business through the changes. Often there will be a period where cash flow is low, but I feel that we’ve overcome that through off-farm income.”

“Succession has also been a big thing for us lately, centred around an opportunity to access more land to expand our business, and to help family members through change. We’ve been able to navigate our way through that process thanks to Project Pioneer,” Brett said.

“Through the project, we’ve come up with different scenarios and different ideas to enable all parties to come to an agreement.

“We’re in the final implementation stages now and it looks like a win-win for everyone.

“We overcame that through the resources of the Executive Link board and RCS staff, tossing ideas around the table and learning from other people’s experiences.”



*Pip says one of their biggest achievements has been to match stocking rates to carrying capacity.*

**“The widespread drought across NSW has really brought it home that more initiatives like Project Pioneer are needed.”**

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

Like many primary producers, the Kraffts are acutely aware that what they do on-farm has a ripple effect beyond their boundary fence.

Having achieved significant changes in their business, they're keen to show other producers the impact of the improvements they made.

“We'd like to help spread knowledge of good land management practices throughout the catchment,” Pip said.

“It's incredibly important to create and maintain prosperous, productive communities, and good land management is a cornerstone of flourishing rural communities. Poverty and hardship are extremely detrimental to the environment and, equally, depleted land cannot sustain successful communities. If you have prosperous, successful people, the environment is also more likely to prosper.

“For me the Great Barrier Reef has always been really important. My family has been involved in catchment management initiatives across eastern Australia, and we are all passionate about managing land and waterways to reduce erosion and sedimentation and to preserve water quality, which ultimately helps protect the Reef.

“Not long after we found out we were successful with our application for Project Pioneer, we went on a holiday to Pumpkin Island and it was great to be able to tell our daughters what we were doing.

“We explained that it would take time and effort, but what they could see around them when we went snorkelling would benefit from it.”

“The widespread drought across NSW has really brought it home that more initiatives like Project Pioneer are needed,” Brett said.

“The way the land has suffered from over-stocking during the drought, to the huge mental strain that these people are still going through. Projects like this can help everyone make the right decisions at the right time and be more proactive.

“The message needs to be, have a look at what you're doing now and I guarantee you'll be doing something that could be improved, whether it's the environment or your business.

“Have an open mind, seek education, but most importantly, act on it.”



*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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