JUST ADD WATER

Couple's water plan pays dividends

Old Good Hope at a glance

Location: 35km outside of Springsure
Property size: 4,818ha
Average annual rainfall: 660mm
Enterprise: Backgrounding

After laying more than 20km of poly pipe to connect 25 new watering points on 4,818-hectare Springsure operation "Old Good Hope", managers Keegan and Zilla Green are reaping the rewards of a more strategic approach to stock management.

The planned watering network lay the foundation for the application of rotational grazing methods that not only grew the productivity of the land through more even pasture utilisation, but also helped wage war on parthenium weed.

"We would have easily reduced the parthenium by 75% in some areas," Keegan said.

> *"By allowing the country to properly rest, let the grass fight back through. There is certainly still parthenium here, but we know we are heading in the right direction with it."*

The couple have lived on Old Good Hope with their three daughters, Alira (10), Mckenzie (8), and Taelyn (5) since being purchased in 2015 and first learned the basics of regenerative farming foremost from Zilla's Dad Greg Ashton, who owns the property.

Mr Ashton honed his skills through Resource Consulting Services (RCS) courses back in the nineties, a path Keegan and Zilla, who now play an active management role in the business, have been following since attending an RCS Grazing for Profit™ school in 2017.

This year, they refined their learnings with the support of the Grassroots Project (Grassroots), funded through the Queensland Government's Reef Water Quality Program. The goal is to reduce run-off to the Great Barrier Reef in the Fitzroy, Burnett-Mary and Mackay-Whitsunday regions, while increasing grazing profitability.

Backgrounding at the front of operations

It was in 2015, that rotational grazing and the establishment of the new water network (which did have funding support from the Fitzroy Basin Association and Central Highlands Regional Resources Use Planning Cooperative Limited) was first implemented and since that time, regenerative practices have helped Old Good Hope grow into a powerful backgrounding operation.

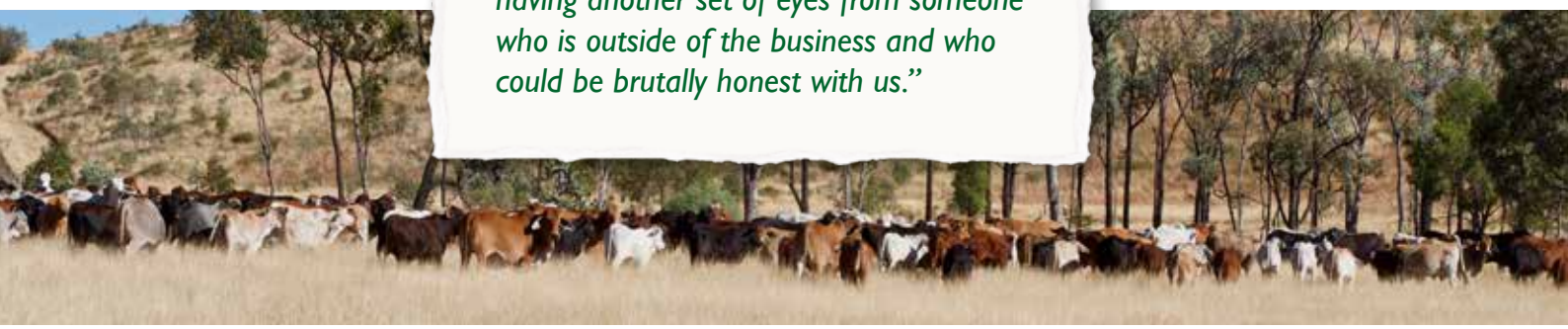
Cattle are bought from sales as far north as Mareeba, and graze between 14 paddocks across blade-ploughed softwood scrub, Brigalow, Blue Gum Creek flats and Cyprus pine country.

From there, they benefit from 420ha of dryland forage crops and 60ha of irrigated silage crops watered by a centre pivot, before being grown out to 400kg to 480kg and sent to a Southern Queensland feedlot.

"We are turning off between 1,800 and 2,500 head per year and it's our goal to eventually reach 3000 head," Keegan said.

"We know we have to be proactive, and to be constantly looking at our business and adapting," he said.

"Andrew was invaluable. It was worthwhile having another set of eyes from someone who is outside of the business and who could be brutally honest with us."



"We use the MaiaGrazing app to monitor and log our rotations, and to set up graze plans to ensure the stocking rate matches the carrying capacity. How often we shift cattle all depends on the season, how much rain we have had and the grass in the paddock.

"The app helps us easily work out if the amount of grass in the paddock is adequate for the stocking rate."

Productivity gains have also been achieved through supplementing stock through DIT AgTech technology, where urea is directly injected into their stock's water, opposed to supplementing through dry feed.

Although the property should receive about 660mm of annual rainfall, totals have never reached more than 450mm since Keegan and Zilla arrived in 2015.

To help mitigate drought, they established feed pens in 2020, built to Meat and Livestock Association feedlot standards, to ensure their stock have a place to be fully backgrounded in dry times when the country needs rest, and allow them to opportunity buy and sell regardless of turbulent market condition.

Tailored advice

Through Grassroots, the Greens received mentorship from George Stacey and Andrew Lawrie, who put the profitability of the Old Good Hope management place under the microscope.

"Andrew's profit analysis indicated our feed pens, which we have only set up, are working well for us at the moment but we learned we will need to keep an eye on market changes," Zilla said.

Keegan agreed and said his takeaway from the RCS training was to 'plan' to be flexible.

More work to do

This year, Keegan and Zilla enacted a natural sequence farming plan, to take even stronger action to replenish Old Good Hope, and guard against erosion challenges the property has succumbed to in the past.

Natural sequence farming is a practice of landscape regeneration which implements earthworks to restore the natural flow of water and for the Greens family, this will mean pushing contour banks into their hilly country to slow the flow of rainwater.

"We want to try to hold the waterflow back into our country a little more as we have some rolling hills," Keegan said.

"There are a lot of cattle pads and whenever water gets into them you can't stop it getting a run on, that's why we are doing a little earth works to try to get the country in a position where the water can be back to flowing naturally like it used to."

While hopeful natural sequence farming will increase productivity, Zilla remains focused on what happens below the soil surface, as she knows this is key to the health of any grazing enterprise.

"We want to create healthy soils, so the water can soak right down to the roots, we will increase the biodiversity and groundcover, which means, there will be less runoff leaving our property."

This project is funded through the Queensland Government's Reef Water Quality Program.