

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

The Central Australian Grazing Strategies project
Working Paper Series

‘Country-condition dependent’
grazing in the goldfields:
Bulga Downs, WA

D. Walsh

Working Paper

55

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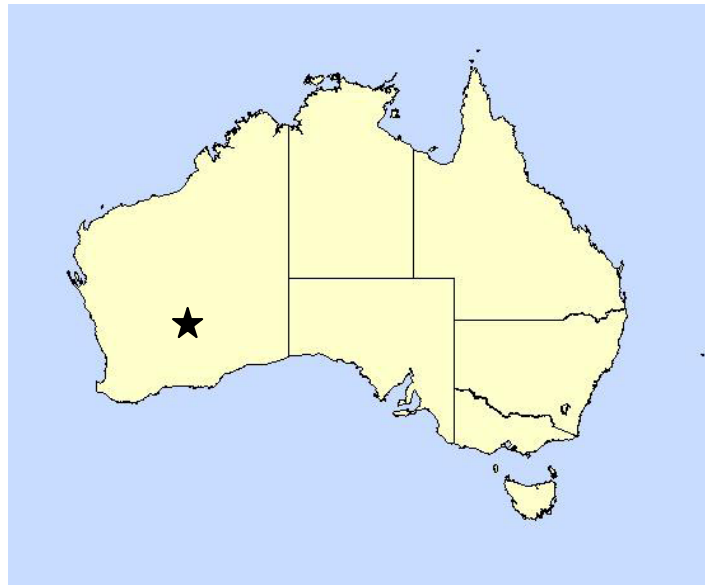
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'Country-condition dependent' grazing in the goldfields

Bulga Downs, WA



Key points 287,000 hectare property in the WA Goldfields	The McQuies have owned Bulga Downs station in the WA Goldfields since 1984. Situated 340 km north-west of Kalgoorlie, Bulga Downs consists of granite, ironstone and sand plain country and receives an annual average rainfall of 225 mm. The dominant trees and shrubs are mulga, sugar-brother, bowgada bush, mallee gums, saltbush and bluebush. Prominent grasses include broadleaf and narrowleaf wanderrie, kerosene grass, windgrass and white top granite grass. Previously a sheep station, the McQuies now produce Angus and Shorthorn cattle for the domestic and export markets. Cattle are mustered using trap yards.
Fenced to country type, one third of the property always being spelled	The grazing strategy David McQuie has been refining his grazing system for the past 22 years. His family are recognised throughout the district for their conservative approach to land management and David's observations and experience over a lifetime have led to the current management system.
Wool cuts increased from 3.5 kg to 5.7 kg per head	There are five main paddocks on Bulga Downs and these are fenced to country type. Fences are five wire (four plain and one barb). There are 51 waterpoints and the McQuies continue to upgrade two of these per year from sheep to cattle standard. David describes his grazing strategy as 'country-condition dependent' grazing. A minimum of one third of the property is spelled at any given time with the length of the spelling period dependent on the season and the condition of the paddock. The spelling period ranges from 1 year to 10 years, with David describing this spelled country as his 'environmental bank balance'. The McQuies began trialling the system by starting with the areas that needed to be shut up immediately. After seeing the positive results, they rolled out the spelling system across the remainder of the property as quickly as possible.
Cows and calves retain better condition during dry periods	Decision making for stocking rates, timing and spelling The stocking rate is variable and depends on seasonal influences, the condition of the country and the condition of native animals. David believes that the numbers, condition and migration patterns of native animals are a good indicator of the condition of the country. Decisions to move stock are based on observations of the level of pasture defoliation, the presence of new growth, level of ground cover, rainfall patterns and the distribution of plants. David does not use stock condition as an indicator as he believes that by the time animals are looking poor you've left it too late.
	Objectives of the grazing system The reasons for adopting the spell grazing system at Bulga Downs include: • to improve production • to increase the stability of production and income • to improve land condition and prevent degradation • to improve drought management.



David believes while neighbouring property herds struggled, his Angus and Shorthorn cows still produced calves owing to better quality and quantity of pasture available on his property. Image courtesy of David McQuie.

“A big mental change is required to make the transition to an alternative grazing system”

Results

Livestock

Prior to removing the sheep six years ago, David had increased his wool cuts from 3.5 kg to 5.7 kg per head. It is still too early to see significant production changes in the cattle herd, but he does note that he has been able to produce calves during the drought when others in the district struggled. The better quality and quantity of pasture has meant that cows are in better condition and are able to fall pregnant and raise a calf even during dry periods.

Financials – costs and profits

Initially the system was difficult to implement due to a lack of infrastructure. The investment in new fencing and waters saw an initial decline in their bottom-line and a source of off-farm income was required. Over time however, profitability has increased and is now quite stable. The McQuies have recouped all of their early investment and now continue to invest in development and upgrades. There are no specific costs being incurred to run this grazing system that wouldn't be part of a normal station operation.

Land condition

Since the implementation of the spelling program, David has observed a dramatic increase in the amount of pasture in his paddocks. The soils are now more stable and fertile as a result of increased leaf matter on the surface. Consequently, there is less erosive run-off during heavy rains. David notes that when they first arrived at Bulga Downs a 4 mm rain would “run the creeks”. Now more than 10 mm is needed to get the creeks flowing. The benefits have been accelerated by gaining better control of feral goats and kangaroos using waterpoint management and culling. David has seen biodiversity improve “out of sight”. For example, there has been an increase in the numbers of mallee fowl,

red-breasted robins, mistletoe birds, thorny mountain devils and the like. Pastoral Board inspection reports and photographs from monitoring sites confirm the improvements in land condition.

People

David feels that the property is now easier to manage as a result of using this grazing system. Initially, a mental transition was required to accept the wisdom of locking up a third of the country. This was particularly true when profitability suffered initially and results weren't immediate. With patience though, positive results began to show after about two years and some of these are still becoming apparent 20 years later. Learning and adaptation are constant and ongoing.

Drought and pest animal management

David feels that his grazing system copes very well during drought conditions. This is supported by the fact that his cows continue to raise calves during dry times. The removal of the additional grazing pressure from feral goats and kangaroos also helps to retain the feed and ground cover for longer. In the past, goats were trucked off the property and any remaining ones were shot. Kangaroo shooters have also operated at times. With an increase in the wild dog population in the Goldfields area, goat and kangaroo numbers have been suppressed.



The five main paddocks on Bulga Downs are fenced to country type and a minimum of one third of the property is spelled at any given time.

Image courtesy of David McQuie

“Look at it through your kid’s eyes: it will take a long time to return the country to optimal condition”

Advantages of the system

David nominates the following advantages of his grazing system:

- better land management
- better water management
- improved animal condition.

Disadvantages of the system

Some of the disadvantages of adopting a different grazing system have been:

- ridicule from others
- a decrease in the bottom line initially
- the possibility of getting it wrong.

Recommendations to others who want to try it

- be very sure
- identify a second income source.

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