Good planning is a key part of ensuring your farm business is resilient during tough times

Ooralat Station is owned by Kevin and Shelly Taylor and is situated west of Mount Surprise, Far North Queensland. The station is a family-run cattle breeding business and is approximately 14,500ha. The average rainfall for Mount Surprise is 790mm and typically falls during the wet season from December to March. There are various land types on Ooralat, predominantly range soils, red basalt, Georgetown granites, clay alluvial and black basalt.

Setting goals for business success

When the Taylors purchased Ooralat in 2017 the land condition was fair, with 800 breeders and a 50% weaning rate. The property only had four paddocks and one set of yards. Their goal was to improve both land and cattle condition, while increasing carrying capacity.

Ooralat was drought-declared in 2018 and the importance of a good management strategy became clear. They found out about available Drought Preparedness Grants, applied for and received funding, and a plan was put into action.

Shelly and Kevin Taylor

Building drought resilience through infrastructure

Ooralat was fenced into nine breeding paddocks, one bull paddock, three holding paddocks, two weaner paddocks and a few horse paddocks. Water troughs were installed in all paddocks for a larger water distribution over the property. Another two sets of yards were built to keep mustering and walking cattle to a minimum, with the furthest walk at muster being approximately 7km.

Through implementing lighter stocking rates, supplementation programs, and a well-managed breeding strategy that included controlled mating, improved pasture utilisation through smaller fenced paddocks and extra watering points, they were able to improve productivity and profitably significantly. Carrying capacity increased, which allowed them to increase their breeder numbers and weaning rate by 30%. Currently there are 1,200 breeders producing approximately 960 weaners every year. The average weaning weight is 220kg.

The Farm Business Resilience Program is jointly funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and the Queensland Government's Drought and Climate Adaptation Program.

FutureBeef is a collaboration between the Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australian government departments and Meat & Livestock Australia to provide coordinated delivery of online information for the northern beef industry.

Australian Government | Future Drought Fund | Drought and Climate Adaptation Program | Queensland Government

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Becoming drought prepared through hay production

Food security to better cope with dry periods was the initial focus for the Taylors. A 32ha hay paddock was developed — half irrigated and half dry land — and enclosed by electric fencing. The low-cost, weed-free hay produced provides additional marketing options during dry periods by holding weaners on feed until market prices increase. Future plans include increasing their hay production to sell off farm and boost income, plus explore the possibility to incorporate silage production as additional feed storage to be better prepared for future droughts.

Dam on Ooralat for irrigation

Grazing management for long-term land productivity

The Taylors use conservative stocking rates suitable to the long-term carrying capacity of their land types. When the property was first purchased they sought advice on indicative stocking rates from their local Department of Agriculture and Fisheries Beef team and have modified these depending on the season and land types within the paddock. Light stocking has improved the productivity of preferred grass species and legumes.

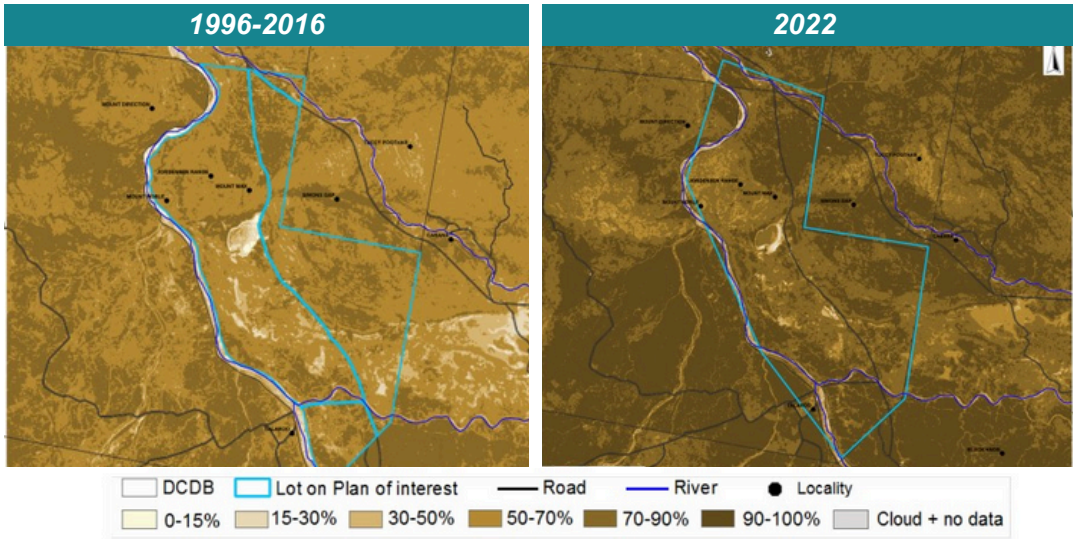
Every paddock is broken into management quarters based on the land type composition. To improve pasture productivity and utilisation each management quarter is burned every four years to manage rank, unpalatable grass and weeds. Utilisation has also been improved through fencing smaller paddocks and adding extra watering points. These strategies have led to more productive pastures, better ground cover, reduced sediment loss and better water quality. Rubber vine was a large problem along waterways when the property was purchased but is being controlled through chemical application.

Breeder management for maximising selling rates of “kilos of beef”

Management of their Brahman and Droughtmaster breeding herd is based on simple principles:

- Controlled mating to reduce lactation during the dry season between December and April.
- Three mustering rounds, made up of:
  - One round of processing (January).
  - Two rounds of weaning (April and September).
- Managing body condition by:
  - Supplementing breeders with phosphorus lick year-round.
  - Feeding 30% urea lick blocks in the late dry season.
  - Weaning all remaining calves at the September round to reduce breeder energy requirements at a time when feed quality is poor.
- Improving animal productivity and fertility by:
  - Keeping the best progeny as replacement heifers.
  - Selecting males as bulls from high performing cows through good record-keeping, genomic and semen testing.

	2017	2024
Weaning rate	50%	80%
Land condition	Numerous areas of high weed infestation	Reduced weed infestation through grazing, fire and chemical control
Ground cover	32% of the property above 70% ground cover	89% of the property above 70% ground cover



Ground cover across Ooralat prior to the Taylors purchase in 2017 vs now

An investment strategy for long-term profitability

Their strategy of incremental improvements shows a long-term investment mindset focused on increasing the value, productivity and profitability of their property.

Through their forward-thinking approach, dedication to innovation and willingness to adapt to new ideas, the Taylors continue to set a shining example and are a standout success story in the grazing industry.

Advice from the Taylors if you're considering grant funding

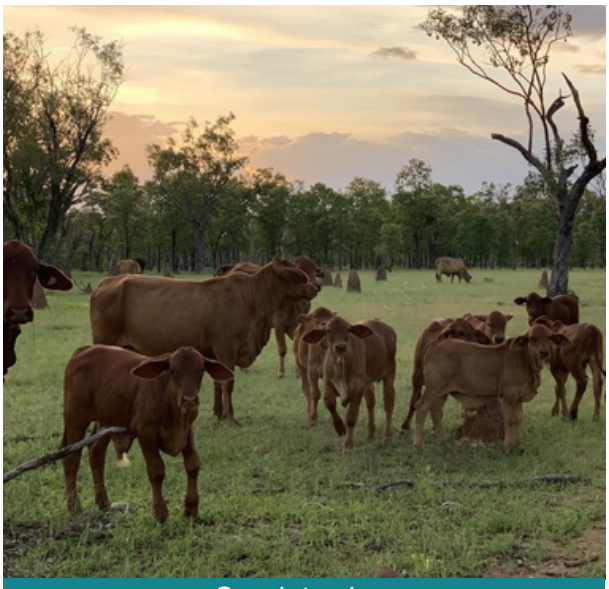
They both emphasise the importance of setting goals, staying inspired, and continuously improving operations.

Kevin said, "Get out there, have a look about for opportunities and gain knowledge from industry events and experts. Success is a combination of everything, never one thing. One thing does not fix anything."

"You've got nothing to lose. Why not!" said Shelly.

Available support for a simple application process

To obtain a Drought Preparedness Grant through the Farm Business Resilience Program, the Taylors enlisted the support of NQ Rural Financial Counselling Services. This service assisted them in clearly defining their goals and identifying the associated business risk. Communication was conducted via email and phone for convenience. The counsellor played a key role in streamlining the submission process so the Taylors could spend more time out in the paddock doing what they enjoy.



Ooralat calves

The Farm Business Resilience Program is jointly funded by the Australian Government's Future Drought Fund and the Queensland Government's Drought and Climate Adaptation Program. For more information call 13 25 23 or visit daf.qld.gov.au/droughtassist.

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