

A high-tech look at land

By MATT WARD - NQ Register 23 March 2006

INNOVATION sprung from confusion, one could say, when northern grazier Jeff Bucknell founded his rural property design business, Cosmic Desert.

Mr Bucknell and his wife Rayna own and run Cheltenham Station, Torrens Creek, from where Mr Bucknell runs the business which, he says, “possesses the entire range of specialist skills, equipment, hardware, software and meta data to address all aspects of holistic property resource planning and design.”

Cosmic Desert utilises a unique process to accurately validate the accuracy of NRM Regional Ecosystems (RE) maps using a legitimate methodology to establish areas of thickening and encroachment.

The primary tools of Mr Bucknell’s trade are four-wheel-drive, ATV, GPS, measuring staffs, reference materials and, of course, the all important laptop. Since 2004, Cosmic Desert has been utilising such tools to allow beef producers to do what they do best – produce beef – while enlisting a third party to handle NRM mapping and property design issues.

“I’m finding NRM maps extremely inaccurate in so many cases, and nothing changes unless one goes to the lengths to which I go,” Mr Bucknell stated.

“Property owners could be waiting until 2011 for maps to be changed if left in the hands of NRM. The value-adding advantages of fast-tracking the process are enormous.”

Mr Bucknell said that landholders are increasingly concerned by government expectations and ongoing public accountability issues in light of recent changes to vegetation management legislation, leaving many at a loss as to where to turn in relation to taking the necessary steps to develop their land.

“People are uncertain about the regional ecosystems themselves or, more importantly from a producer’s point of view, the white areas inaccurately delineated on the maps.” He highlights the concern that Property Maps of Assessable Vegetation (PMAVs) not only lock in previously cleared areas to be exempt from requiring permits in the future, but also categorises many other areas for ongoing opportunities.

And Mr Bucknell draws attention to the fact that while government departments no longer provide any direct one-on-one service, it is still unclear at this stage what third party contractors such as Greening Australia and AgForce are specifically able to offer.

In addition to ground truthing, Mr Bucknell has developed Cosmic Desert to offer services such as preparation of PMAV and ongoing clearing applications, preparation

of holistic or specific vegetation management plans, clarification of regrowth height and canopy parameters, the providence of clear documentation to substantiate thickening and encroachment issues, plus general topographical information and features including cadastral boundaries and elevation data.

Cosmic Desert can also provide GPS training and introduction to elementary GIS and farm mapping, and the property design service includes paddock subdivision, cell and rotational grazing planning, area and distance calculating, plus watering points and paddock layout.

Concentrating mainly on North Queensland, in its three years of operation Cosmic Desert has serviced upwards of 100 clients, and is currently fully booked until the end of 2006.

John Atherton runs a beef operation with his wife Heather across a number of northern properties, the home block being the 13,000 hectare (32,000 acre) Redcliffe Station, Hughenden, and is a northern board member of AgForce's Cattle Council, in turn a member of the Cattle Council of Australia.

When it came to completing a PMAV application, Mr Atherton enlisted the services of Cosmic Desert because he couldn't legitimise taking the time to learn the necessary skills for something he would in all probability never revisit.

"It's not rocket science but it's something you have to know your way around, and I didn't have the time. That's why I got Jeff to do it," he said.

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