

DELBESSIE OPENS GATES FOR GRAZIERS

The historic Delbessie Agreement and other recent changes to Queensland land management legislation mean that northern and northwestern graziers need more than ever to be open to opportunities to maintain production sustainability, according to local land resource planning consultant Jeff Bucknell.

Mr Bucknell, who has operated his Rural Property Planning and Design business Cosmic Desert from his Torrens Creek cattle property for the past six years, said that producers need to protect their resource security and viability by capitalising on any initiatives that are currently on offer.

“For many of my clients who are already kept busy focussing on the day-to-day operations of their enterprises, it can be almost impossible also to keep up to speed with the increasingly complex and continually changing rules and frameworks in areas such as lease renewals, vegetation moratoriums and regulations, Wild Rivers declarations, Reef laws and even local council weed management planning,” he said.

“To take the pressure off, they need a specialist with up-to-date policy knowledge and technical skills who can come in for a few days to troubleshoot, advise and consolidate their existing plans and aspirations while providing them with the practical tools and precise scientific information required. I’ve been helping people sort out their property planning for years now, and I’m still as passionate as ever about what I do.”

Mr Bucknell praised his long-term clients Ken and Jane Marsterson from "Craig's Pocket, northwest of Townsville, who earlier this month were the first Queensland lessees to sign a Delbessie lease agreement.

Known also as the State Rural Leasehold Land Strategy, the agreement is a framework of legislation, policies and guidelines developed to support the environmentally sustainable productive use of rural leasehold land for agribusiness.

“When I first met Ken and Jane, they’d already been thinking laterally about their enterprise’s future. They suggested the idea of committing themselves formally to the conservation aspects of their land stewardship by establishing a Nature Refuge on the property,” Mr Bucknell said.

“As a result, in 2006 I put together the Natural Resource Plan for the Marstersons. This encompassed my ground-truthing “Craig’s Pocket” on an all-terrain vehicle, plotting infrastructure on GPS and producing spatially accurate maps and high-resolution remotely-sensed images for Ken and Jane, all of which rectified the major flaws in the remnant/non-remnant mapping that had been available to them at the time.”

Cosmic Desert identified paddock sizes and cadastral lines, determined arable areas vs. non-arable areas and confirmed the correctness of the Regional Ecosystem descriptions and land types. It also provided the necessary data for a PMAV and regrowth permit, the delineation of the Nature Refuge Proposal and the application for the Renewal of the Term Lease under the Land Act.

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“Initially, even with their track record of excellent sustainable management practices, the Marstersons were looking down the barrel of a standard 30-year lease renewal under the old rules. With the resource planning I provided to them, they were able to make informed decisions and negotiate with confidence to have their value as land managers recognised and their lease extended to 40 years, with further options in the pipeline.”

Ken Marsterson said that the planning and pre-emptive aspects of the process leading to the signing of a Delbessie Agreement would be the most time-consuming for graziers.

“With the agreement covering half of Queensland, it’s absolutely essential that lessees don’t wait until the last minute to put their ideas into action. Cosmic Desert provided us with rigorously-researched yet cost-effective ‘packaged on a plate’ information in the preferred government formats and therefore hastened the assessment process from a departmental perspective, but even so it took three years to reach this point,” Mr Marsterson said.

“I would recommend that graziers start working now to address all aspects of resource management planning to secure their place for themselves and for further generations in any compliance scenarios that may emerge.”

Mr Bucknell said that while the Nature Refuge established at Craig’s Pocket was an excellent example of how operators can adapt to government requirements, it was not the only option available to graziers wishing to negotiate an extension of their leases.

“It’s largely dependent on the attributes of each individual property and its stewards and what unique aspects they can contribute to environmental, cultural and indigenous values. For example, if you don’t have the special features required for a nature refuge you might instead be able to offer pasture condition, grass cover and species composition as bargaining tools, along with a plan of how to maintain or improve those conditions in future.

“While many clients often engage me to help them address one specific issue, I ensure that I collect and collate as much information as I can so they can utilise it in many other different plans and adapt it to suit a range of possible regulatory and legislative changes and requirements that may confront them. Otherwise it would be like stepping around a rubbervine so you can poison a mesquite.

“Naturally, in successfully negotiating a Delbessie agreement, past management practices are going to be a component of how much a property and its lessees can offer. But planning for the future and having information recorded in a methodical, exact and easily-accessible format, rather than leaving things until the last possible moment to act, are what will allow graziers to seize all the opportunities that are out there now and down the track.”

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