



Visions for 2045: A pastoralist's perspective on advocacy with purpose

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Abstract

Visitors to my home in the Arcadia Valley north of Injune in Central Queensland remark at the breathtaking beauty that surrounds us. Framed by the sandstone cliffs of the Expedition and Carnarvon Ranges, beef cattle graze on a diverse pasture comprising dense perennial pastures and mixed legume species. Looking forward 20 years from now, I envisage I will be looking out over my paddocks with an immense sense of pride knowing that in 2045 the land continues to reward generational stewardship and advocacy. However, this reality will require ongoing commitment to sustainable practices, as well as business agility, as new markets emerge, and unforeseen challenges arise. In this paper, I present my own firsthand experience of business advocacy with purpose directed at environmental stewardship and accountability. I then present a case for concern on the legacy impacts of coal seam gas extraction in the rangelands, as an example of competing land use challenges. The system designed to protect the interests of all stakeholders cannot be compromised for short term financial gain, as this will only lead to increased risks of adverse longer-term environmental impacts, production losses and psychosocial trauma. I will end with future expectations relevant to all rangeland users and policy makers.

Introduction

I live in the “Arcadia Valley” region located north of Injune in Central Queensland, Australia. Here, my husband and I and our three children (Price Cattle Company Pty Ltd) produce organically certified, grass-fed beef in the Brigalow Belt Bioregion (DES 2018). This region, characterised by brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla*), a native woodland (DCCEEW 2024), is home for many of thousands of years to the Traditional Owners, the Iman Aboriginal People (DESI 2019). This bioregion is also a known biodiversity hotspot, given the high historical rates of land clearing that has occurred (Thornton and Elledge 2022) and subsequent ecological communities reported as being threatened (CSIRO 2022).

Since European settlement, clearing of the brigalow bioregion of Queensland and New South Wales has made way for agriculture. In the last decade, the Arcadia Valley and Darling Downs regions of Queensland have been identified and targeted for development of the coal seam gas (CSG) reserves under prime agricultural land (Dougall 2024). The production of CSG, also known as coal bed methane, sourced from underground well extraction has become an integral part of the gas industry. A major driver was a decision in 2000 by the Queensland Government to boost the contribution of gas to the State's power supply (Commonwealth of Australia 2014), with 1996 seeing the commencement of Queensland's domestic CSG production (Towler et al. 2016). The expanding activities of the CSG industry in Queensland's rural, agricultural areas has come with public scrutiny, particularly with regards

to environmental and social impacts, and as a result, government regulation has been evolving, including amendments to the land access framework (Towler et al. 2016).

Our firsthand experience of confronting such competing land use challenges confirmed the rules that govern such mandatory “land access” considers only that, i.e., accessing our private land. This single dimension does not address the multiple dimensions of impacts that hosting a gas production and processing facility has (e.g., see Dougall 2024), such as on our business, our values and our common rangeland commitments.

With growing local and global concerns about loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation, and the need to maintain a social license to operate and address climate change risk, means land users in the rangelands must prioritise better environmental outcomes. Advocacy with purpose, at all levels, I believe, will be key to reaching this goal. This includes advocating your own business and commitment to land management, paving the way for others through proactive leadership, advocating collaboration and adoption of technologies to better inform policy, and advocating for equity and accountability from all rangeland users.

The following paper presents our own business advocacy in the rangelands, provides a case for concern about competing land use challenges, and ends with visions for 20 years from now.

Our systematic approach to advocacy

Land settlement and agricultural developments: An historical directive for the Fitzroy Basin

Broadscale clearing of Brigalow in central Queensland was directed by the state under the Land Development Fitzroy Basin Scheme initiated in 1962 (Thornton and Elledge 2022). My husband’s father was 19 when he drew a ballot block that was part of the 1962 land development scheme (e.g., see Cowie et al. 2007 after Donohue 1984 and State Library of Queensland 2019). He was directed to broadscale clear the standing brigalow scrub, erect fences, plant improved pastures and build infrastructure on the land. Today, the Fitzroy Basin carries the largest cattle herd in any natural resource management region in Australia, making up a quarter of Queensland’s herd (Thornton and Elledge 2022).

Some of the challenges we face today as pastoralists is pasture condition decline. In the Fitzroy, pasture rundown and dieback are particularly concerning (Bowen and Chudleigh 2017) and something we have had to deal with ourselves. We partnered up with the Department of Primary Industries and established new pasture plantings (grass and legumes) and adopted grazing practices aided by technologies (see next section).

Advocacy & leadership: Embracing technologies, backing yourself and paving the way for others

Since transitioning to a certified organic production system in 2014 and establishing our Fullblood Wagyu herd, we have ensured access to an exclusive beef market for our cattle that allows us to achieve premium market returns for our beef. Our land and herd management practices are targeted towards improving animal production while also protecting biodiversity and natural resources. This is done through the adoption of agribusiness-based technologies to improve decision making, such as using Optiweigh (remote walk over weighing) and CiboLabs Pty Ltd (pasture imagery service), to give us the frequent data capture required to forward plan and make more informed decisions on holding and selling of stock (DPI 2022).

We are firm believers of “healthy food starts with healthy farms”. It is possible to grow production animals and look after the natural resources they depend on, providing there are sound decisions being made, such as adjusting stocking rates according to seasonal conditions. Through our participation in industry programs, we are more aware of innovations and methods to improve our efficiencies and reduce our carbon footprint. As further examples of industry best practice, we have used satellite derived estimates of food on offer and ground cover to not only inform stock movements to manage pasture utilisation, but to also identify low cover areas needing attention (e.g.,

either more rest from grazing or mechanical intervention required). We have also developed our water infrastructure so that cattle grazing distribution and evenness of grazing can be better managed. A spin-off from this has been improved calving rates and weaning weights (DPI 2022), where cattle spend less time walking to water (i.e., reduced energy expenditure).

We (Price Cattle Company) are serious about and committed to responsible, professional pastoral practices, and we have been recognised for this and acknowledged as industry role models. Our varied industry related activities have included hosting field days on pasture dieback, hosting a property tour during the internationally recognised Beef Week 2024, speaking on panels, being interviewed for agricultural publications on topics ranging from succession to technological advancements, through to providing a recipe and article for a Workplace Health and Safety cookbook.

In 2022, we received a prestigious Farm Biosecurity Producer of the Year award, that acknowledged our professionalism towards farm biosecurity, innovation, technology, record-keeping, environmental sustainability, and business transparency (Farm Biosecurity 2022). Business transparency is particularly important to us as we know from our own experiences that industry compliance can be overwhelming. This prompted us to use social media as a platform to help others and share with other pastoral businesses our own farm biosecurity plans.

Issues of competing land use: Changing legislation to create equity in advocacy

We have firsthand experience with competing land use challenges. We were taken to the Land Court of Queensland by a fossil fuel mining company because they wanted to be granted approval to drill more CSG mining wells on our land, in accordance with their legal right. In response, we initiated proceedings against the mining company for breaches of the existing Conduct & Compensation Agreement (CCA) that for five years the mining company ignored requests to address. They did not keep their word and act in accordance with their public statement that they only accessed land where they were welcome and when questioned as to why they were pursuing access, the response was a changed narrative that they were now choosing to gain access in accordance with their legislated rights.

We had previously invested significant resources and time into negotiating an agreement with the mining company, to which they did not honour. When the company wanted to drill more wells without addressing ongoing breaches, we choose to fight. Our response was strategic and wide ranging. The mining company had been threatening our family with legal action for many years and we planned our response to prepare for this worst-case scenario.

Most pastoralists are so busy on their farm they do not spend much time away from it. In our case we had to be proactive in raising our profile as best practice operators. The threat to commence court action materialised when new lawyers were engaged. We were in mediation with the CSG mining company and notice was given that the mining company was withdrawing from the negotiation process and immediately commenced Land Court proceedings.

We learnt this threat of legal action was a tactic to force us into signing a new CCA. The attitude of the CSG mining company was if they can't comply with the agreed CCA they would just have a new one written that did not contain any of the previous clauses.

Going to court is very expensive and this multinational company expected us to back down to avoid court. They did not expect us to fight and provide documented evidence of their operating practices. We had drone footage evidence of vehicles traversing unauthorised access roads, photographs of mining infrastructure that created animal welfare risks, reports from experts outlining the land degradation caused by unrehabilitated land disturbed by the mining company and five years' worth of correspondence that demonstrated the tactics of the mining company towards our family.

During the time since 2018 when the CCA had been signed and then breached we were ensuring all avenues for landholder complaints were being exhausted and extensive evidence was being collated to demonstrate the non-compliant conduct of the mining company. When the actions of mining company staff resulted in hundreds of organically certified cattle losing their organic status and corrective action notices being issued by our organic certifier, the mining company further compromised our certification by ignoring deadlines for stockproof fencing to be erected. We followed the regulatory process and lodged complaints with the various Government Departments, the Queensland Gasfields Commission and the Queensland Land Access Ombudsman. The process took years, and we learnt the legislative system creates a situation whereby the Government and the resource company, as the Authority Holder, exclude the landholder from their interactions. While we were told there was confirmation of Environmental Authority breaches that correlated with our lodged complaint, we learnt the system we expected to protect the rights of the landholder and the environment worked slowly and secretively.

Although disappointed by the lack of transparency in resources governance and procedural fairness, we did not lose focus. In choosing to be active participants and advocate with purpose we broadened our knowledge, network and experience. Often the skillset associated with the business of farming is underestimated. Successful pastoral operations understand the importance of working both “on” and “in” their business. Working parallel with the legal process we looked at the tactics employed by the mining company and ensured our small family business was not only credible but formally acknowledged as industry leaders. We did not target the mining company; we instead became advocacy generalists. When asked for our commentary on any issue relating to our business and operating environment we provided it.

We took the position that if mining fossil fuels is necessary for the economy and would continue to expand its footprint, then transparency and accountability must occur. Agreements between other landholders and mining companies were not our concern and we make no judgement of landholders who embrace mining on their pastoral land. Unlike the mining company, we do not have shareholders wanting high financial returns on their investments. Price Cattle Company stakeholders are the future generations of our family who will make their assessment of our performance using different key performance indicators. The battle in the court was therefore only one aspect of our strategy. It was important to provide an inside-out perspective of the legislative and regulatory system involving mining leases on pastoral land. We chose to engage with the individuals, organisations and departments tasked with a component of the system, no matter how small their contribution. We documented, questioned and held everyone to account.

Visions for 2045: The role of pastoralists and standards for all rangeland users

A shared vision of caring for our rangelands sits forefront in my mind. For me, as a pastoralist, experiencing moments when nature is communicating with you, often at daylight or dusk, is a reminder that we are part of something greater than ourselves, and that is something worth protecting. Only after we have, over many years, challenged ourselves to engage, understand and adapt to the changing environment, can we become empowered enough to step outside of our comfort zone and start making real, transformative change.

As land users of the rangelands, it is important that we embrace our role as guardians of the ecosystem. It is hoped that in 2045, rangeland monitoring technologies will be well evolved that they are not only used to aid decision making but also used to demonstrate on-ground validation of environmental stewardship. For pastoralists this might include ecosystem services payments. By then it is hoped pastoralists won't have to fight for third parties to treat the land respectfully. The systems will be transparent with enforceable actions that prioritise environmental sustainability over corporate agendas and mining royalty payments.

The International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists commencing in 2026 provides a unique opportunity for Australia. Using the year to establish a shared, documented vision for the rangelands could create a blueprint for their future management. All stakeholders should operate within the same base rules of conduct when it comes to

environmental outcomes. Pastoralists have a great opportunity to share their stories in 2026 and embrace a narrative that demonstrates their environmental stewardship credentials. Often the public only hear the well scripted, well resourced, non-substantiated attacks on Australian farmers and their farming practices. As environmental offset programs and transitioning land use for carbon projects in Australia creates ripple effects in the rangelands, the need for standardised environmental assessments will become increasingly important.

Conclusion

From my own perspective as a pastoralist managing the land, I accept I work with nature as well as in it. I also believe that advocacy with purpose will be key for improving the future protection and management of the rangelands. The reality of competing land use challenges needs strong advocacy to ensure systems in place designed to protect the land are accountable, impartial and effective. Pastoralists also need to be actively raising their business profile and public visibility, embracing scientific innovations and celebrating generational wisdom. Established credibility is essential when questioning the frameworks, regulations and legislations of other industries operating in the rangelands. In 2045, it is hoped that rangeland communities will be vibrant, and the next generation of land managers will be in tune with nature, tech savvy, strong advocates of conservation, and are able to thrive under changing environmental, social and economic conditions.

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