

PROJECT PIONEER

CASE STUDY 2019

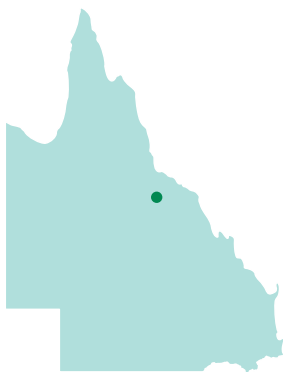


KALE & KARIN ROBINSON
HILLSBOROUGH STATION, RAVENSWOOD

KALE & KARIN ROBINSON

Farmers know that the weather, interest rates and cattle prices are beyond their direct control, but also that the right response to these forces can benefit both beef production and sustainability.

That understanding has propelled North Queensland beef producers Karin and Kale Robinson to undertake significant changes to their land and livestock management at Hillsborough Station.



© KENT WARD



Kale and Karin Robinson.

Located in the Burdekin region, approximately 70 kilometres from the coast at Ayr in the Great Barrier Reef catchment, the 43,000 hectare (106,000 acre) property runs close to 6,000 head of Brahman and Droughtmaster-cross cattle.

Kale and Karin's approach to managing the property and its natural resources has been inspired and supported by their involvement in Project Pioneer, a ground-breaking partnership between Resource Consulting Services (RCS), WWF and the federal government.

The Robinsons purchased Hillsborough Station about three years ago in partnership with Karin's parents, Pat and Jenny Williams, who are based in nearby Charters Towers. After just two years of participation in Project Pioneer, the Robinsons have already increased their carrying capacity through improved pasture management.

The crux of this improvement is not just a change in farming practices, but in the mindset which underlies their management decisions.

"When we first moved here, we came into what was classed as drought in this area. Since we've had the information and knowledge provided by Project Pioneer, we approach the land with different eyes," Karin said.

Kale said the tools and support to which they now have access have proved invaluable in producing a range of data to help inform management decisions and give them the confidence to act.

"The data is useful for me and Karin because we can see what is really happening rather than just blaming things on drought, which is what we would have done before starting with Project Pioneer," Kale said.

"By collecting data and analyzing it, we know our benchmark carrying capacity is 8.5 stock days per hectare per 100mm of rain. Through the Project we have been able to develop a management plan to match the stocking rate to Hillsborough's carrying capacity."

"In agriculture, you can't change a lot of things, but there are some things you have some control over. That's the frame of mind the project puts you in, so you're not just living on hope that tomorrow it might rain," Karin said.

"You start to understand what the land is doing and how it responds to change, and it's exciting.

"Since being involved in Project Pioneer we've had a paradigm shift – we see ourselves now as being grass producers, because if we can nail that, then the beef is going to be a by-product and it's going to be better for our business.

"Obviously there is big component of understanding the cattle side of production as well, but I think if you go back to basics, and understand that it's also about what's happening in the soil, it gives you new tools. The information is there, so use it!"

POSITIVE CHANGE

With sugarcane fields close to one side of the property and the Leichhardt Range running along another boundary, Hillsborough Station comprises a diverse range of soils and land types. It is also home to a number of waterways, including Eight Mile Creek and Banana Creek and part of Barratta Creek, which all flow into the Great Barrier Reef lagoon.

Amongst the biggest changes the Robinsons have implemented through Project Pioneer is the introduction of rotational grazing and the adoption of new on-farm technology.

This combination is expected to help maintain and increase pastures, and prevent sediment run-off and soil loss, ultimately boosting productivity and profitability.

"We already noticed that just by changing little practices so far, and increasing our body



“Project Pioneer is not just about business. It touches on succession and communication and setting yourself up for the future. It touches on everything.”

The Robinsons have recently built new cattle yards with a low-stress focus. The design takes into consideration the behaviour of the cattle, while decreasing labour requirements and increasing safety.

of pasture, there have been positive effects. It's also profitable to our business - it's a win-win.

“By understanding the grazing circles of the cattle and managing pastures, we've been able to increase our carrying capacity.

“We're about to start a cell rotational grazing system that incorporates a walk-over-weighing system.

“When the cattle walk through the system to get water, it will record their weight and instead of us having to muster a whole paddock, if we want to sell a certain amount of cattle, we can just draft them off in paddocks and pick them up. It will also help us identify any non-performers or sickness.

“We've also just built new cattle yards with a low-stress focus. The design takes into consideration the behavior of the cattle and how they run, and it decreases the labour needed in the yards, while increasing safety.

“We also have a crush-side system that enables more data to be stored. It records weight and reads the NLIS for each different beast. If a female is in-calf, it can also record three different types of data for that beast - for example if it is 1-3 months pregnant, 3-6 months pregnant or over 6 months.”

Karin said Project Pioneer is providing the ongoing support and guidance needed as they implement these changes.

“The great thing about Project Pioneer is you don't just do little things every now and then. You have support all the time, including on-property visits from people who are knowledgeable,” Karin said.

“We have a grazing chart and on-farm monitoring sites throughout the property that help us really look at forage

availability, estimate the number of stock days per hectare that might be there, and basically help us evaluate the whole paddock.

“Being able to read the country and see how many stock days you've taken out and thinking ‘maybe we could put a bit more in there’, it's a continual process, but also when you're new at it, you have that support from Project Pioneer.

“The on-farm monitoring sites are a good record of our management. It's a chance to see the impact of management changes such as more diversity in the grass species coming through.

“Besides drought, we've had some abnormal seasons as well. Last year we had winter rain and so we're managing those events as well. It has allowed us to have flexibility in our business and to make real-time decisions.”

MORE TOOLS FOR THE BUSINESS KIT

Taking a more analytical approach to decision making in a family business has been another benefit of Project Pioneer for the Robinsons.

“We found it has given us more confidence to make some hard decisions or communicate what needs to be done. It gives us some more facts and data to do that, which is important especially when you're communicating within a family business,” Karin said.

“You're not just saying ‘I think we should do this’. It takes the emotion out of decision-making, and I think that's one of the biggest impacts it's had on our business.

“Project Pioneer is not just about business. It touches on succession and communication and setting yourself up for the future. It touches on everything.”



© KENT WARD

The Robinsons have installed a new crush-side system that enables more data to be stored and further enhance pasture management.

“I know the challenges. We’re the first to put our hands up and say we questioned why we should get involved... But the reality is we’re seeing positive changes happening, and it’s benefiting our business.”

Karin said while changing their management practices sounds like an overwhelming task, Project Pioneer made the process more accessible.

“We’re lucky in the sense that we have good communication with my parents. We have regular business meetings just touching base, to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

EMPOWERED WITH KNOWLEDGE

The Robinsons said investing the time and energy into learning more about pasture management through Project Pioneer was empowering.

“Investing in education is an investment in yourself, because it opens up your mind to new ways of doing things and understanding how the land works.

“I know the challenges. We’re the first to put our hands up and say we questioned why we should get involved, before we made the decision.

“But the reality is we’re seeing positive changes happening, and it’s benefiting our business.

“Project Pioneer puts you in contact with like-minded people who are looking for ways to keep moving forward and not just surviving. That’s refreshing, because we all know the obstacles that living on the land comes with.

“You can’t change the weather, interest rates or cattle prices, so what can you change? Project Pioneer has helped us answer that.”



Funding through the Australian Government’s Reef Trust Phase III Investment Programme allows the delivery of “Project Pioneer – Innovation in Grazing Management”. This project aims to contribute to the delivery of the overarching Reef Trust Programme outcome of improving the quality of water entering the Great Barrier Reef from broad scale land use to increase the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef.

For further information on Project Pioneer, contact RCS:
 P 1800 356 004 | E info@rcsaustralia.com.au | www.rcsaustralia.com.au/project-pioneer

COVER IMAGE © KENT WARD