

# Farming on the Queensland Central Highlands

## Ross Ingram, Emerald, Qld

Seventeen years ago I had the opportunity to establish an agricultural based business anywhere along the eastern side of Australia for overseas investors. The investment had to be secure, on freehold land, have growth potential and keep the tax man comfortable.

That investment started with a 20,000 acre underdeveloped freehold property running 43 steers and dryland farming 5,500 acres. We have since added 9000 acres to this property and purchased an equally underdeveloped 50,000 acre freehold breeder property all located in the Springsure - Bauhinia Shire.

We have since cleared an additional 14,000 acres for farming, established silos, sheds, a significant self contained irrigation system, built housing to accommodate 12 permanent staff plus casuals. We have built a 4000 head Droughtmaster herd using Limousin terminal sires. Weaners come to the farming property to grow out and finish on buffel grass and grain.

Our company policy is to put all profits into development, don't borrow, integrate the properties, stay one jump ahead of the process of change being imposed on our industry and above all to maximise our return based on some very difficult seasons and commodity prices.

Some of the key issues we have had to deal with over the past 17 years are:

**Seasons & Prices:** Without the heavy cracking clay soils on the central highlands, that allow us to accumulate soil moisture there would be few prepared to dryland crop this area. We average 650 mm but it varies from 400 mm in 8 hours on 5-2-2002 to 396 mm for the year 1993. Seasons are unreliable, summer cropping is our best option with only three good winter cropping years in our 17 years here.

We now store up to 6000 tonne of grain on farm. Very little crop is delivered to Graincorp depots. I try to establish contracts for half our crop before harvest. Recent feedmill developments north of us have opened up key new markets. World commodity pricing is corrupt, we try to avoid futures trading and currency deals.

**Crop Options:** Opportunistic planting is the key to dryland farming. This involves taking some risks with only a small range of crops, and on marginal moisture. Our best option has been sorghum sown after Christmas and chickpeas for winter. Our sunflower plantings have dropped from an average of 8000 acres per year to barely 1000 acres. Dryland cotton has become a risky gamble. Dry seasons, low prices, escalating costs, white fly etc, limit our options.

**Irrigation:** In 1995 after waiting for a proposed Comet River dam to come to nothing, we started our first off stream storage and haven't stopped developing since. We contain all runoff water on farm and operate under cotton BMP.

Three main ring tanks, one surge area, three temporary storages provide 14,000 ML capacity. Seven flood harvest pumps including 2 x 800 mm, 4 x 650 mm, 1 x 500mm.

582 acres of subsurface trickle fed by two pump and filter systems.

Trickle irrigation delivers savings in some years over furrow (1.48 ML/acre compared to 2.42 ML/acre on furrow). It can deliver efficiencies and higher yields up to 30% but has some equal down sides such as cost of maintaining and rodent damage.

1234 acres of siphon delivered furrow irrigation.

750 acres currently being developed - bank less irrigation an option.

In total 5400 megalitres is harvested from the Comet River through licensed pumps with 13 Cm/sec pump start-up restriction. The remaining 8,600 megalitres is sourced through overland flow diversions. All development just squeezed through a rapidly closing water reform process window.

**Cotton:** The biggest step forward for us has been Roundup Ready and Bolgard II Cotton. Managing weeds, chemicals and staff are our biggest headaches. Every year we trial and change cotton varieties to grasp a small advantage.

This year has produced our best cotton for an average of 4.2 bales per acres and turnout of 39%. The best variety was Sicot 71 BR. Sicot 71 Conventional produced 42% turnout. Every year is different and is affected by weather conditions, available water and insect pressure. Chemical spray drift is a major concern.

While Bolgard II reduces the need for grub sprays, we must watch for mirids and aphids. This year we used two Regent sprays plus one endosulphan spray. Nutrition and watering are critical, which is why we use enviroscans, soil and leaf testing and have an agronomist monitor the crop.

**Minimal Till:** Our dryland farming now involves two 20 metre planters, trailing Simplicity seeders, Garnelle presswheels, Primary Sales superseder points all pulled by two 9882 Versatiles. We use a Miller Nitro with 20 metre boom plus aircraft for spraying. Occasionally we use a conventional AFM planter on sensitive planting jobs.

Conserving moisture in suitable soil types and not beating the soils to death are the keys to successful sustainable farming in our region. We have attempted tramline farming with limited success and are unconvinced of its future.

**Staff:** We have difficulty finding suitable experienced operators. We rely on backpackers and a core of very good experienced men. The local booming mining industry attracts farm operators and many of the key agriculture service industry staff. Our cattle breeder property will eventually be consumed by a proposed mine.

**Change:** There seems no end to the expectation from some bureaucrats and the urban ill-informed that agriculture can and must change to their rules. To avoid unreasonable change being imposed on our business and way of life I have had to get involved in regional natural resource management planning and the water reform process.

We need to adopt new technology, embrace sound genetic engineering and be proactive, to be one jump ahead of our competitors. I get frustrated that too many think short term, haven't realised little comes easy. Farming and rural areas provide a wonderful way of life if we can withstand the pressure!