

# Latest tech all the go at Fossil Downs

By **MATT SHERRINGTON**

SINCE 2016, Rick Ford, manager of pure Droughtmaster herd operation Fossil Downs at Fitzroy Crossing, has been embracing agricultural technology innovations to help improve overall efficiency, animal welfare and staff safety.

Rick and his family moved from a nearby property to run Fossil Downs nearly two years ago.

“The property is 394,000 hectares and has the Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers on the doorstep,” Rick said.

“These two water sources present a major opportunity for agriculture in Australia.”

He said the herd continually fluctuated with purchases, sales and natural increases but there were almost 20,000 head on the property.

Rick said they began trialling modern agricultural technology innovations on the property soon after he took up his management position at Fossil Downs.

“We use data management software to collect stock data which is uploaded to the cloud every night and syncs with our head office in Perth,” he said.

“This data is transmitted and accessible from many positions instantly.

“We’re also using an ultrasound pregnancy testing machine to provide a less intrusive, more comfortable process for our cows, which also provides us with greater accuracy.”

Rick said a walk-over weigh platform had been set up in the paddock at a watering point which provided the staff with data on each individual animal that passes over it.

“It has the capability of drafting off animals at a target

weight range and provides other relevant data from the paddock direct to our computers or phones,” he said.

“We can access information on rainfall, hourly images of the water levels in our troughs and

tanks, the density of cattle in a specific area, satellite images of pasture growth and many other useful and crucial pieces of information.”

Rick said solar technology was being rolled out to reduce their reliance on diesel.

“This can be witnessed on-property with the solar bore pumps, solar hot water and solar lighting we have installed, which are reducing operational costs across the board,” he said.

Digital mobilised radios are also in use, which Rick said has greatly improved communications across the property and significantly enhanced safety standards for employees.

“Our employees wear their radios every day, this keeps staff in close contact so that if an accident was to occur on our million acre property, the employee can push the emergency button triggering an alarm on every radio across the station to raise awareness,” Rick said.

“These learned technologies from the mining industry substantially improve staff safety.

“For example our GPS tracking system ensures that if a vehicle breaks down we can track them in real time and send



□ Fossil Downs manager Rick Ford said they began trialling modern tech innovations on Fossil Downs in 2016 to improve animal welfare, staff safety and overall efficiency of the operations.

out assistance at a rapid pace.”

Rick said the water points had been increased to lower the distance cattle have to walk, reducing their stress and to assist staff with paddock utilisation through grazing management.

“To support the increased water points we’ve increased fencing and we’re moving the herd towards a more controlled mating routine which ensures calves are born at a time where the lactating cow can maintain peak condition, again improving animal welfare, particularly supporting calves more holistically,” he said.

Rick said he always kept a keen eye on new innovations that could be adopted into the beef industry and said many exciting projects were evolving.

“The use of drones on the property is something we’re looking into closely and we’re attempting to ascertain how they could be used to complement our business, both economically and environmentally,” he said.

Rick said Droughtmasters have been used on Fossil Downs for 30 years and were brought in by former owners John and Annette Henwood who “did a tremendous job in developing the herd”.

He has purchased significant numbers of Droughtmaster bulls since he took over as manager and he has been very pleased with how they have performed.

“In 2016 we had a very big wet with extreme humidity which challenged the purchased bulls a bit, but they adapted well and came out stronger and better for it,” Rick said.

Herd development aims for a polled beast that is soft and mature with a high fertility rate, which are grown out to 350kg then sold to the local market.

“The poll gene from the Droughtmaster is a great selling point,” Rick said.

“We always test for the poll gene.

“We want a high semen count and strong morphology results.

“The bone structure must be dense and the beasts must have a safe sheath and definitely not be overfed.

“They have a great temperament, which is balanced with the breed’s muscle formation and physical style.

“Their genetic makeup brings high performance in terms of fertility which creates greater returns to the business and improves the herd.”

Rick said there was a large stand of feed at Fossil Downs to keep the cattle in good shape.

“This is all part of our management plan,” he said.

Rick said he loved being a beef producer as it’s a “fantastic life not just for me, but, also for bringing up my four daughters with my beautiful wife Stacey”.

“When you stand back and look into the industry for the most part everyone is positive,” he said.

“We definitely see growth going forward.

“If we get government support in WA I believe not only Fossil Downs, and not just cattle, but the whole of the Kimberley will grow and prosper.

“We just need access to water from our rivers and recharging aquifers year round so we can together make the Kimberley a powerful agricultural force in Australia.”