

Cattle baron Graeme Acton plans to beef up Asian push

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MULTI-millionaire Queensland cattle baron Graeme Acton is moving to expand his Acton Land and Cattle Company empire further into Asia to help offset the impact of soaring costs and depressed prices in the local market.

Mr Acton has just returned from Vietnam, where the group is looking at developing long-term relationships with Asian customers in a bid to "get new markets where you cut out the middlemen", he said.

"I've just come back from Vietnam in the past week. We are looking at developing long-term relationships with Asian customers in Vietnam and China. We have a business in China that manufactures steel products and we have sold a lot of beef into China over the past eight years or so," Mr Acton told The Australian.

"But we need to escalate the free trade agreement with China to compete with the likes of Canada and the US that put a lot of beef in there."

ALCC owns a number of grazing properties in western and central Queensland and exports beef all over the world.

During the global financial crisis it sold Moray Downs, a 121,000ha station near Clermont in central Queensland, for \$110 million to Indian power giant Adani to help reduce debt levels.

A third of the property sits right above a massive coal deposit. The deal was two years in the making.

The Actons bought the property about 20 years ago for \$7m.

"That has made a massive difference to us, of course, as have many other families (that sold their land) whether it be to mining companies or governments. Especially when we've had 20 years of drought," he said.

Mr Acton said he was lucky he had children who remained in the industry. His son, Evan, plays a major role in the company.

"My wife and I, we are fortunate. We have four children and they are are involved in the beef industry. My son and my son-in-law are managing our properties, as are my brothers, and most of my mates are the same. But a bloody lot of them aren't. They are going into better industries," he said.

The Acton family has been involved with the land for 150 years and Mr Acton said "we want to see them stay in the industry".

"I am CEO and managing director. I am hands on. My son and son-in-law are capable. They are men in their late 30s, capable of doing anything. But they have had their backs to the wall running the operations," he said.

Wearing the badge for his company's trademark Acton Super Beef brand, he confirmed the profitability of the company had come under pressure in the past decade from soaring costs, the high Australian dollar and lower cattle prices. "We still make money, otherwise we wouldn't be here, but it is pretty bloody marginal with the droughts, low commodity prices and high costs of wages," he said.

"Everyone is running on a minimum number of staff. So there is also not a lot of maintenance. This industry is in a worse way than people think."

He remains pessimistic about the outlook. "We could increase our production by 25 per cent in our operations if we had access to more funds," he said.

"I am one of the greatest optimists in the country. So when I start talking things down, people think things must be pretty ordinary. I am 62. I have wasted 20 years of my life battling, in Queensland, a government that is unsympathetic to agriculture and food producers. We have had them kick us from one end of the bloody state to another.

"I say to my younger sons, I hope to God now you will have 20 years of sympathetic government and we have got that now in Queensland. Changes are being made and we are going to see it when the federal government gets in."