

THE AUSTRALIAN

Spared slaughter overseas only to meet cruel death in a parched land

JAMIE WALKER THE AUSTRALIAN MAY 25, 2013 12:00AM



... drought-ravaged property. Picture: Lyndon Meacham Source: The Australian

IT wasn't supposed to be like this. Luke McNevin's job is to look after the cattle that roam Colwell station, not shoot them.

So here he is, as the shadows lengthen in the gidyea country, dappling the spiky stalks of mitchell grass that are bleached as white as the bones scattered among them, trying with all his heart and might to save this poor, wretched cow.

The animal is down on all fours by the water trough, its front legs tucked beneath its head, too weak to get up.

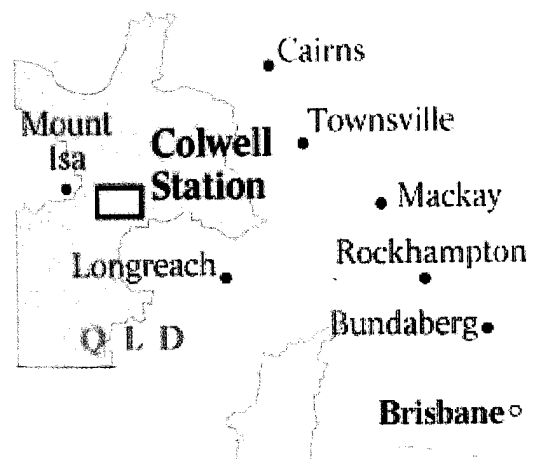
Mr McNevin, 34, has seen it too many times over the past six heartbreaking months, as the drought took hold and the feed died off and his cattle went down, one after another.

"Come on, old girl," he says, urging the cow to stand. He works the 18,000ha property with two backpackers outside the one-pub town of McKinlay in northwest Queensland.

One of them, Nena Leitner, a veterinary nurse from Germany, is operating the front-end loader he has rigged with a hoist to lift stricken cattle to their feet.

DROUGHT CRISIS

Drought declared as of April 1



Source: BOM

The other young woman, Briton Gemma Eastman, helps him drape a cradle of chains around the cow. Its ribs protrude from an emaciated flank as they turn it on its side. The hoist lifts, taking the animal's weight, and for 15 minutes they wrestle with it. To no avail: the cow's legs are like jelly.

Source: The Australian

Finally, Mr McNevin says: "I had better get the rifle."

He struggles to say how many head of stock he has had to shoot since the summer rains failed - 50, 60 maybe - but his lonely battle is far from an isolated one.

From the Gulf Country in the far-flung north to the Channel Country in the south, Queensland is in the grip of an animal welfare crisis that, according to the men and women at its epicentre, is like no other they've endured.

Some are calling it the perfect storm. Embittered producers say it began brewing in 2011 when the federal government suspended live cattle exports to Indonesia for five weeks over revelations of cruelty in its abattoirs. The trade, crucial to the north Australian beef industry, is yet to recover. This year, 267,000 head will go to Indonesia, down from about 400,000 two years ago, according to the Australian Live Export Council.

The domestic market was hit by a beef glut, prices crashed and stock that should have been on a ship stayed where they were, intensifying pressures on marginal pastures. "There was no through-put," says Charles Burke, of producers group AgForce.

Last November, a heatwave pushed the thermometer on Mr McNevin's veranda to 47C and bushfires erupted, burning out dozens of properties around Georgetown and across to the basalt hills north of Hughenden.

The usually reliable monsoon deluged southeast Queensland and Brisbane, not where it was desperately needed. By this week, drought declarations covered a third of the state, putting some 300,000 head of cattle in the firing line.

Like many others, Mr McNevin says he was caught when the drought took hold. He had been building up his herd in expectation the rains would come, as they had for a succession of good wet seasons, and that the market would stabilise.

"We were in the process of getting our older cows off but we were a year late," he says ruefully.

At this time of year, the paddock that rolls away from the property's homestead should be thigh-deep in grass instead of the pale remnant of pasture that clings to the baked soil. His Hereford and Brahman-cross cattle would be tipping the scales at 500kg, not wasting away.

Surveying the scene, Mr McNevin shakes his head. "You would get more nourishment chewing on a pencil," he says, kicking at a spindly clump of grass.

For now, his cattle are being kept alive by what they can forage and a feed supplement known as lick. Mr McNevin and his helpers pour it into cut-down drums as the stock straggle out of the shade, thin and exhausted-looking. There are about 400 head left in this desolate place. He calls it the boneyard. When he puts an animal out of its misery he throws a chain around the carcass and drags it to a sad heap that grows bigger by the day.

They started dying during the heatwave, he explains. When the dams dried out, cattle would get bogged in the mud and he would wheel out the front-end loader to pull them free. Often it was too late; the animal would be so weak there was nothing to be done.

Kinder to use the gun than leave it to the crows or wild pigs, he says quietly. If he could move more cattle off Colwell, he would, but there is nowhere for them to go. The cattle in the boneyard paddock are all cows, older ones at that, and they are in no fit state to be put on the trucks that are shuttling stock as far south as Goondiwindi, near the NSW border, for agistment or to an abattoir.

The costs are staggering. At nearby Strathfield station, Heather Moore was quoted \$90,000 to truck 1600 bullocks 1100km to the saleyards in Roma. Forget it. She and husband David opted to move them the

old-fashioned way, on the hoof, with a drover. They have had just 13mm of rain this year on Strathfield and worry that the cattle earmarked to be sent to the abattoir in Townsville, 12 hours away by road train, will not be fit to travel when the time comes next month.

What to do? "They are going to get weaker and weaker," Ms Moore says, "and eventually they won't be able to move. Do we shoot them? We're probably going to have to because it's already happening now."

Tourists have reportedly complained to the police about the condition of cattle they saw by the Landsborough Highway. It's galling to the local graziers, who say they don't need anyone to lecture them about their responsibilities at a time like this. Mr Burke, the AgForce chief executive, says the animal welfare crisis in the Queensland cattle industry dwarfs anything that has occurred with live exports - especially to Indonesia, which still accounts for about 45 per cent of the trade.

"We said all along that it (the 2011 export ban) had the potential to cause even more perverse animal welfare issues medium to long term, and that's now proving to be the case," he says. "That is not a prediction we would have liked to come true."

At ground zero in McKinlay, some locals wonder why Animals Australia, the group that exposed the cruelty in the Indonesian abattoirs, hasn't been banging the drum over the plight of their cattle. The group's executive director, Glenys Oogjes, replies that it is deeply concerned about the "terrible situation", and backs the Queensland government's move to turn over parts of five national parks and eight federally sponsored National Reserve System conservation reserves to grazing, an emergency measure that was strongly opposed by federal Environment Minister Tony Burke.

Ms Oogjes, however, is adamant that fallout from the live export ban played only a minor part in the crisis, as the Indonesians had already signalled their intention to move to self-sufficiency in beef. "We empathise with them," she says of the Queensland graziers. "But to blame Animals Australia for the current situation, when the writing has been on the wall for very many years on live exports ... is a really risky strategy for any farming enterprise."

Asked to comment on Indonesia's responsibility for the condition of the Top End cattle industry, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa says the question is "too far" from his ministerial responsibility. However, he says the Indonesian government is trying to promote a mutually beneficial trade and investment regime for both countries' cattle industries.

In particular, Jakarta wants Australia's northern cattle industry to invest in Indonesian beef production and contribute breeding stock. "It must give benefit for the two parties," Dr Natalegawa says. "Therefore, to Australia, we are not only inviting them to trade but also to invest, to boost cattle industry capacity in Indonesia it is mutually beneficial, win-win, not only trade but also investment."

Federal Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig told the Senate last week Queensland would be better served by signing on to a new farm finance package to give needy graziers access to low-interest loans of up to \$650,000. Russell Lethbridge, of Werrington Station, adjoining Blackbraes national park, one of those to be opened, says local producers are already carrying too much debt, and the last thing they need is to go deeper into hock.

"People have got to understand this is not a normal dry time," he says.

The desperation is palpable. A friend of Ms Moore recently came across 13 cattle dead or dying in a near-dry bed and was so distraught he could barely bring himself to talk about it. At Bagstowe Station, head stockman Chris Meikle says there is not a blade of green grass left on the 21,000ha run. The cattle are dropping weight and his hope is to walk as many as he can into Blackbraes, a former cattle property that was purchased by the state for \$15m and converted to parkland.

Charles Burke agrees that questions might be asked why some graziers left it so late to move their cattle. "Well, sometimes there haven't been options to shift them earlier," the AgForce man says. "These things tend to happen a bit quicker than one might think. Once people can't get their cattle on trucks because they are in a certain condition it becomes a welfare issue ... options can be limited."

Mr McNevin knows about that. As the chilly night closes in, he is still giving his all to get that forlorn cow on to its feet. There's no helping it, though, leaving just one thing to do. "Disheartening is the word

you would use," he says, as Ms Eastman, 26, weeps quietly. "Cattle are stubborn. They keep trying right to the end, but she's given up now."

Soon enough, a shot rings out.