

Opinion: Marauding wild dog packs wreak havoc in outback Queensland pushing drought-plagued graziers to the wall

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Wild dogs are becoming a major concern to sheep graziers. Picture: Peter Lorimer



Gavin Durie with a wild dog which brought down 30 sheep in a single night.

DINGOES or wild dogs have killed seven million sheep in the past two decades, says a prominent western Queensland grazier.

Stephen Tully, whose family has bred sheep continuously at Quilpie since 1874, said the mongrel dogs had ripped billions out of the Queensland economy. Dingo kills were the main reason landholders had switched to cattle.

“If a dog gets a taste for sheep he can kill 10 to 20 a day easily,” he said.

Working in packs the kill rate by wild dogs could be higher, said 43-year-old Tully a father of five.

“It’s bad,” he said. “We had a calf come in recently whose ears had been chewed off by dogs.

“It’s not uncommon to find 30 dead sheep in a single kill.”

After tallying sheep kills for more than 20 years, Mr Tully said wild dogs were largely responsible for the rapid decline in wool industry over two decades.

“On my reckoning dogs would have eaten more than seven million sheep,” he said.

“They have hit massively and driven people into cattle.”

He warned cattlemen had put themselves at risk financially by getting out of cattle altogether and not having a second string to the bow.

From the early 50s to 1970, Queensland’s sheep flock regularly topped 20 million, Bureau of Statistics figures show.

In the last 15 years sheep numbers in Queensland have plunged 72 per cent, according to John McVeigh, the Minister for Agriculture, who visited the wool town this week.

He said there are 2.9 million sheep in Queensland.

Barcaldine Mayor Rob Chandler said the sheep industry may collapse if numbers fell below a “critical mass” of two million.

Mr Tully and two of his neighbours are fighting back. They are building a so-called cluster fence to encircle 600,000 acres (242811ha) of prime grazing country now in drought.

“It will be a slow, step-by-step program that may take 20 years,” he said.

One 35kg killing machine brought down 30 sheep in a single night last week at Barcaldine in Queensland’s parched central west.

The bloody ambush that left sheep entrails scattered across a dusty paddock was described by grazier and former champion footballer Paul Doneley as a thrill kill.

“Attacks like this happen every night across the state,” he said.

“We are losing the battle. The dogs are taking the life out of the west.

“They come in wave after wave – and are destroying the sheep at will.”

On top of the worst drought since 1965 outback towns like Barcaldine are reeling. Doneley, 29, said there were real fears across the outback that many towns were doomed.

The former Queensland Reds star who played for Australia with the Rugby Sevens has returned to take over the family farm 20km south of Barcaldine and faces an uncertain future.

The towns are being deserted. Old people die and are not being replaced.

Small business is collapsing. Even pubs are going broke. “Keeping our young people at home in the district is difficult,” Doneley said.

“The town is very quiet – almost dead already.”

Doneley was speaking at a crisis meeting this week of local councillors and community leaders called by John McVeigh, Minister for Agriculture.

Mayor Rob Chandler told McVeigh he had seen a 200kg weaner pulled down by a dog.

Doneley and another grazier at Winton told me they feared the wild dogs were larger and more ferocious because they were cross breeding with pig dogs and other town dogs that strayed into the bush.



Barcaldine grazier Paul Doneley said there were real fears across the outback that many towns were doomed. Picture: Jack Tran

There are fears of new super-size mongrel dingoes that may be part maremma sheepdog. Others may have mated with a bull mastiff-great dane cross, the preferred pig dog.

“The dogs go missing and no one bothers to go looking for them,” Doneley said.

McVeigh visited five quintessential Queensland sheep towns – Quilpie, Blackall, Barcaldine, Longreach and Winton to reassure locals the State Government was stepping up its battle against dogs while adding to drought relief. McVeigh said 75.5 per cent of Queensland was in the grip of drought and forecasts from the weather bureau for summer storms were not positive.

Rain was needed urgently.

He said the State Government had invested \$10 million to fight wild dogs in the past two years. State Cabinet this week allocated an extra \$18.7 million in drought relief packages taking the total funding available to \$98 million up to June 2015.

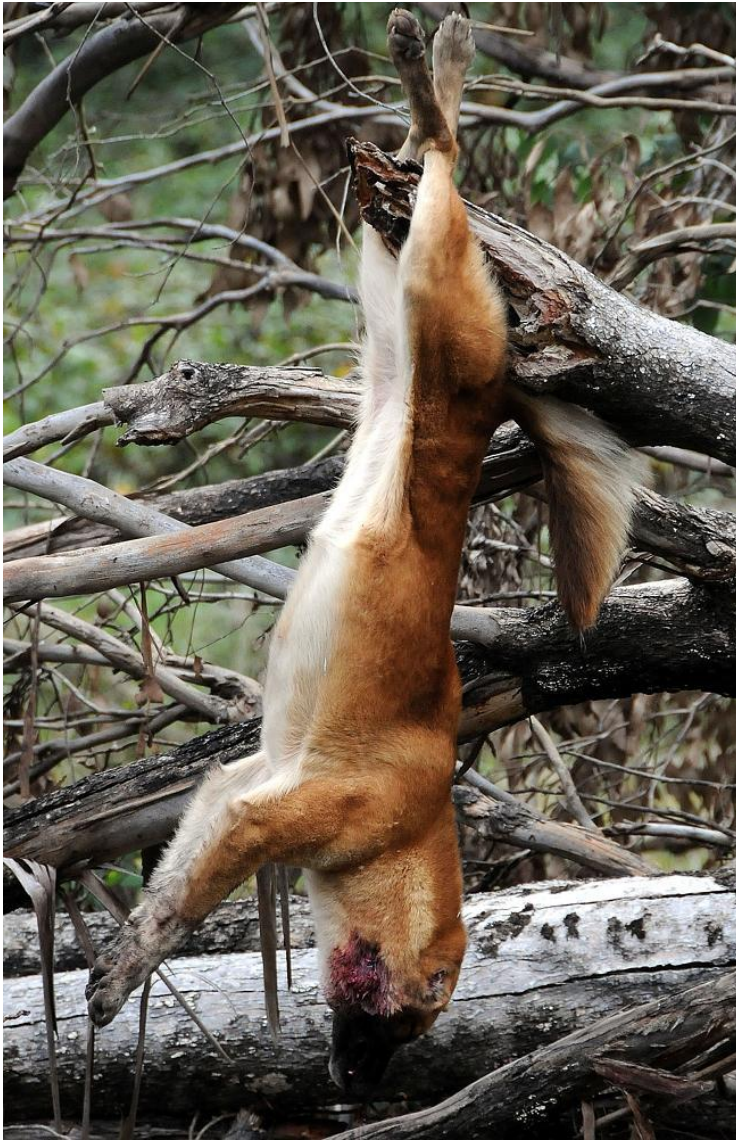
McVeigh warned the fight against dogs was a responsibility that had to be shared with landholders.

He said he favoured a rigorous campaign with baiting, shooting and exclusion fences.

Paroo shire Mayor Lindsay Godfrey said the evil twins of drought and dogs created a disaster in Queensland. There was great stress in the community.

It is possible to fly across large swathes of outback Queensland, as I did this week, and not see a blade of grass. Many sheep and cattle pastures resemble a desert.

Farmers and graziers are again at tipping point yet those of us who live in the cities are probably unaware of the hardships facing outback families.



Wild dog packs are on the march, and are organised in a kind of animal kingdom military formation. Picture: Peter Lorimer

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Then there are the roos.

Jane Bignell and her husband Boyd, both 56, live at Widgeegoara south of Cunnamulla and have 10 roos for every sheep.

And they have around 3500 breeding ewes.

“For us kangaroos are a bigger problem than wild dogs,” said Jane, a Somerville House old girl who stumbled upon the joys of bush life when she arrived as a governess three decades ago.

Each roo devours 1.1 times the amount of fodder than a sheep, she said.

Shooters cleaned up 4000 roos this year and 4000 the year before. They hardly made a dint.

Prophetically, the word widgeegoara is Aboriginal for “turn back quickly”.

It’s advice the Bignell’s forebears ignored when they settled at Widgeegoara Creek in 1869.

The Bignells may be down to their last 200 cattle but they refuse to be beaten.

“This drought is hitting hard,” Jane said. “It is one of the worst we have had.

“But we love it and we are not going anywhere.”

Jane and Boyd are proud their three grown-up children, Jamie, Sarah and Drew have stayed out west. Jamie runs another family sheep and cattle property, Wambin, nearly 500km away in the Quilpie district.

“It’s very dry. In the last three years we have had half our average rainfall,” he said.

Jamie is pushing mulga to keep 1000 head alive.

The family even trucked cattle to Wangaratta in Victoria 1500km away on agistment.

There are now 44 drought-declared shires.

McVeigh said it was not just primary producers but small business operators in the towns who were struggling.



Queensland Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry John McVeigh reassured farmers the State Government is stepping up its fight against wild dogs. Picture: Jack Tran

Member for Gregory Vaughan Johnson said Quilpie, Blackall, Tambo, Augathella, Barcaldine and Winton were desperate.

And there was great hardship in the Longreach district.

“This is crunch time,” he said. “Even when rain comes it will take the cattle industry five years to get back on its feet.”

He said towns were dying. “The small towns have been left to rot on the vine.

“The biggest export industry is our kids.

“We send them away to educate them and they don’t come back.”