

NEWS

The ebbs and flows of CSG water use

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Don Bell on his farm 'Lallalindi' on the banks of the Condamine River.

Matthew Newton

IT WAS the first evening of a cutting horse event at the Chinchilla Showgrounds several months ago when two men sitting in the stands were talking farming.

The man on the right leant in to the man on the left after a lengthy conversation and said: "But I'll tell you what, those blokes who are on Coal Seam Gas (CSG) water, I'd like to know how they're doing."

"Yep," the man continued. "That CSG water must be like having a licence to print money."

Greg Bender, who farms a 2000 acre patch of earth called Burradoo, just south of the Chinchilla Weir, laughs and shakes his head when it's put to him like that.

"I wouldn't say it's a licence to print money," he said, chuckling.

"It's a licence to turn it over. It's definitely been financially rewarding for us since it's come on stream, but it's been a lot of work and a lot of risk too."



Greg Bender on his property 'Burradoo' in Hopeland.
Matthew Newton

To say the availability of treated CSG water through Queensland Gas Company's (QGC) beneficial re-use scheme has transformed Mr Bender's farming practices would be an understatement.

Originally a dry-land cropping set-up where he might have planted one crop every 18 months, Mr Bender now has 1800 acres of irrigation at his disposal.

"It's been three pretty solid years of building ditches, levelling paddocks and installing pipelines and pumps," Mr Bender said.

"It was alright for the first 12 months because you didn't have the country - but then after the initial 12 months all of a sudden you've got another 1000 acres of irrigation and you're growing all these crops, so you've created all this extra workload just to grow the crops and then you're still trying to do the development work as well."

Mr Bender put in for and signed a contract with QGC for up to 4800ML/year across two properties, though it is unlikely he will ever actually receive those volumes of water.

Teething problems at QGC's Kenya Water Treatment Plant meant the water allocations were inconsistent at first.

"It was just up and down; one month you'd get 100% and then all of a sudden the allocation might get halved for the month at a day's notice," Mr Bender said.

Since then the allocations have become more consistent, though it is unlikely the scheme will ever reach its full potential.

Mr Bender estimates he has pumped about 6000ML in 32 months, or about 2400ML/year.

With the madness of the early years behind him, Mr Bender is now seeing the fruits of his labour.

Where once Burradoo's main crop was cotton, with single paddocks harvested once every two-three years, now he's got a continual cash flow.

"Nearly every month we're selling something because we're growing crops all year round," he said.

The almost guaranteed supply of water has given Mr Bender the confidence to hedge his bets and take advantage of good commodity prices long before it's time to harvest.

"There's a lot of marketing opportunities... we forward sold a crop of cotton six months ago because we knew we had the water to grow it and the price was good," he said.

"Where's when you haven't got the water it's always in the back of your mind that I'm not game to forward sell it just in case.

"The classic at the moment is these chickpeas - you've heard them all talking about how chickpeas are going to be an all-time high this year? Well we haven't grown chickpeas in probably 10 years and we're probably going to grow half the farm under them now, because we can."

There are other benefits too - Mr Bender has had to put on three full-time employees to keep up with the increase in work and with all the pumping going on, machines need maintaining more often.

Another positive he didn't factor into his plans is that with so much country under irrigation, any time there's a rainfall event - even a small one - the run-off goes straight into his dam.

"It's been a huge benefit to us," he said.

"We were probably a bit lucky because we were already existing irrigators and we had a lot of machinery and had built a channel down to the river based on the fact that we might be able to pump water with a flood harvesting licence."

Mr Bender said he looked at the figures and took a gamble, which it now seems will pay off.

"If it was as good as what they said it was, it would have been absolutely brilliant, but I mean, some water is better than none. That's all I looked at. I probably was a bit fortunate that I went holus bolus and worked out that'd be the maximum amount of water I could use per year and put in for it."

Treated CSG water is piped from the Kenya Water Treatment Plant along a 20km pipeline into the Chinchilla Weir.

To date Sunwater have delivered a total of 45,186ML since operations began in 2012/13.

So far this year, the pipeline has carried an average of 52ML per day. The pipes are capable of supplying up to 100ML per day.

Some of that water is taken direct from the pipeline, as in the case of farms like Nine Mile Lucerne, on the Chinchilla-Tara Road.

The remainder enters into the weir.

The CSG water accumulates in the weir over the course of the month, before it is let out in flows for other users downstream of the weir to take their allocations.

While downstream releases of irrigation water cease when the weir water level drops below a certain point, treated CSG water must be released, regardless.



The Chinchilla Weir last week was sitting at 31% capacity. Treated CSG water is released from the weir regardless of water storage levels.

Matthew Newton

A Sunwater spokesperson explained this was because the purpose of releases from the Beneficial Use Scheme is to provide regular scheduled water supply for agricultural production including irrigation and stock water.

Farmers on the CSG water scheme run the risk of being fined \$160 per megalitre if they do not use all of their allocation each month.

Downstream of the weir on the banks of the Condamine sits 'Lallalindi', Don and Lorraine Bell's 840 hectare cattle property.

While other farmers on the scheme already had irrigation infrastructure in place, the Bells had to start from scratch.

In 2012, Mr Bell bought and installed a pivot in preparation for the supply of CSG water.

"The pivot's been in for about four years, but we went two years before we started getting water. The pivot just sat there. It was a most expensive bird roost," he said.

"That was one of the big issues from my point of view. We had to have our system ready to go when they started reverse osmosis on the water, and it was supposed to happen in 2011 or 2012, and it didn't.

"So everybody had to have their systems all ready. So here it was sitting there ready to roll and we didn't get any water for two years because (QGC) took longer to build their RO plant than what they thought it would."

These days, Mr Bell, like the rest of the farmers on the scheme, is receiving about half the allocation he thought he would. That's okay in the winter when he doesn't use as much water, but the hotter summer months are a squeeze.

The pivot waters about 35 hectares, half of which is under improved pasture with Rhodes Grass and the other half under forage sorghum and burgundy bean.

"It gives us a lot more flexibility in what we do because we've got that feed that can be produced nearly all the time - the problems are that sometimes in summer time we don't get enough water for what we want to do," he said.

"It would be better if we had more water... at the moment I'm only watering half of my area because our water is down, and then if they cut us back even more it's going to make it more difficult."

Because the Bells are only receiving half their total allocation, lack of water storage facilities becomes an issue - something which would be useful in the winter time.

But water storage costs money.

"We didn't want to go back into too much debt at our age," Mrs Bell said.

"None of our boys are probably going to come back onto the farm so we didn't want to set ourselves up with a big debt. It was a bit of a trial, really, to go ahead and do what we've done."

Mr Bell said that because they weren't irrigators before signing onto the scheme, they didn't have a storage, nor did they think they could afford to install one.

"150ML storage will cost \$150-200,000 probably and we already had used enough money to set (the pivot) up down there," he said.

"We're actually looking into it at the moment. We've got some people giving us some technical advice on how we can go about building a storage and making our system a little more efficient."

Despite the ongoing issues with supply, Mr Bell said the pivot had given him more flexibility. In the past, there have been plenty of times where the Bells have had to sell their cows due to drought. He now runs 250 head of cattle, but in the past has had to cut his herd back during the dry.

During a period of severe drought in 2006, he had 32 cattle on the property.

"It was so dry the truck got bogged in the sand," he recalled.

Mr Bell hopes that with the CSG water allocation, that won't happen again.

"It doesn't drought-proof you, but you can deal with the dry times a bit easier," he said.

For more information on treated CSG water and the beneficial reuse scheme, click [here](#).