



How MDH is maximising the performance of 55,000 Cape York breeders



By [Mark Phelps](#)

Updated November 21 2025 - 7:20am, first published 3:00am

 Save

 Share

 0



 MDH manager Clint Smith coordinates MDH's northern breeding operations: Iffley, Dunbar and Rutland Plains.
Picture Mark Phelps





It's one of Australia's greatest beef operations, stretching from Cape York Peninsula down to the Cloncurry/Winton region, across central Queensland and onto Queensland's western Darling Downs.

The McDonald family's MDH cattle business covers 3.36 million hectares (8.3 million acres) across 15 properties.

The cattle are bred in the Cape York Peninsula area, backgrounded in the Cloncurry/Winton/Central Highlands districts and then finished on grain at its feedlot on the western Darling Downs.

At the heart of the business are MDH's northern breeding operations: Iffley, Dunbar and Rutland Plains.





📷 Heidi and Clint Smith at the Iffley headquarters south of Normanton. Picture Mark Phelps

Combined, the three stations are home to some 55,000 Brahman-cross breeders that produce weaners that are grown out on country around Cloncurry and Winton, ultimately destined for MDH's 10,000 head Wallumba Feedlot operations at Condamine.





MDH manager Clint Smith oversees the running of the three sprawling northern properties working closely with station managers Jack and Ashton Fitzpatrick on Dunbar and Carl and Annabelle Weston on Rutland Plains.

"What we are always very conscious of is making sure there is always grass for the cattle, and that they can make the best use possible of that protein," Mr Smith said.

"We're fortunate we have these big expanses of country, but the challenge has always been handling the big changes in the protein levels of the pastures during the wet season compared to the dry.





Four Season Company Pty Ltd

Premium Animal Nutrition

www.fourseasonco.com.au

"It's a balancing act between having the most productive genetics, the infrastructure including water, and the supplementary nutrition that keeps us on track through the changing seasonal conditions."



📷 Nutritional supplements are playing a key role in keeping MDH's northern breeding herds in production. Picture Mark Phelps



AUSTRALIAN
OWNED & MADE



What that means is the tens of thousands of cattle that are run on the several millions of acres have access to the nutrition necessary to drive the productivity of the high-quality Brahman-cross herd.

In the north, that means providing supplements to ensure the breeding herds are fertile and able to rear a sappy calf through to its weaning.





Four Season Company Pty Ltd

Premium Animal Nutrition

www.fourseasonco.com.au



📷 The 100kg blocks are rolled directly from the pallet at key watering points across the paddocks. Picture Mark Phelps

Working closely with the Four Season Company, MDH has developed a supplementary feeding system to match the extreme wet and dry conditions experienced in the gulf and on the peninsula, and particularly the increasingly lower levels of pasture protein through the dry season.





The range includes the popular ZM nutrition blocks named in honour of the late Zanda McDonald, which were specifically designed for northern Australia's cattle industry, with 5 per cent of sales going to the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.



📷 How MDH is maximising the performance of 55,000 Cape York breeders





The 100 kilogram blocks come in two forms:

- The ZM Breeder Block is a 20 per cent urea/mineral supplement specifically designed for cattle grazing dry feed.
- The ZM Weaner Block is a formulated supplement with 10pc bypass protein meal and 10pc urea for grass-fed cattle.



📷 Zoe Patton and Bonnie Boorman on Rutland Plains.
Picture Mark Phelps





The blocks were developed following the extensive testing of both soil and pastures to develop an effective, cost-efficient nutrition supplement.

The cylindrical blocks are delivered on plastic-wrapped pallets and loaded onto station trucks for delivery around strategic points close to waters across the stations.





📷 Rutland Plains manager Carl Weston with 1000km ZM nutrition blocks. Picture Mark Phelps

Genetic improvement is also a key focus.

Belmont Red bulls have been introduced to the northern herds during the past five years to improve carcass performance and ultimately, eating quality.

While still in its trial stage, Mr Smith said there were plenty of signs the well-grown Belmont Red-infused calves were a winner.





📷 Ashton and Jack Fitzpatrick with their children LJ, Collins and Hallie. Picture Mark Phelps

Clint Smith and his wife Heidi are based on Iffley, which is situated 160km south of Normanton and 240km north of Julia Creek.





The diverse station is roughly half sandy forest and half open plains country is on both the Saxby and Norman rivers.

It takes about 14 people to run the well-established breeding property.



📷 Henry Gray, Tom Doyle and Lacjie Marriott with a load of ZM blocks ready for delivery. Picture Mark Phelps





Iffley's diverse terrain means it performs well in most seasons and carries about 20,000 breeders.

Dunbar is 300km north of Normanton and typically runs 20,000 Brahman breeders and is prone to the wet season flooding from the Mitchell River.

The country comprises loamy river flats along the Mitchell River and sandy open forest country to the south and because of the annual wet season is noted for its short working season of about seven months.





📷 Sam Timbs, Jack Sargood and Spedding Pearce. Picture Mark Phelps

In that time it employs a head stockman, up to seven stockmen and women, a cook, mechanic, grader driver, fencers and various contractors.

Dunbar typically runs 15,000 Brahman breeders with a staff of about 14 people during the mustering season.





Four Season Company Pty Ltd

Premium Animal Nutrition

www.fourseasonco.com.au



📷 How MDH is maximising the performance of 55,000 Cape York breeders

MDH's most northern property is Rutland Plains, which joins Dunbar and has 55km of the Gulf of Carpentaria as its western boundary.





Situated in the Mitchell River delta and featuring massive areas of spectacular wetlands, Rutland Plains runs about 13,000 Brahman-cross breeders.

After weaning, all of the male cattle and spayed females are trucked south to fatten on country south of Cloncurry.

https://www.queenslandcountrylife.com.au/story/9072883/exploring-mdhs-massive-north-australian-cattle-operation/?src=rss&utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=Post&fbclid=IwQ0xDSwOMe5xleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAo2NjI4NTY4Mzc5AAEeypKk396VAJYAH9TcfGaJycdNb898jG0bOVhZ1ur_6hVwL6o0zfAbj57JiK8_aem_o9u2y1_V0-FrSSTxCdfN3Q&brid=RIbeTQLXoDCWT1UKgizhYQ

