

Riding the wave of new technology

- GPS data to help Mountain Cattlemen

Sitting in front of her computer, Cass McCormack picks up her mobile phone.

Her father, Bruce, is on his horse on the edge of Mt Stirling, waiting for the call.

“They are a little further on Dad, keep going North and over into the next gully. Two cows.”

Riding up over the hill Bruce can see exactly what was promised – two black Angus cows with calves at foot, quietly chewing under Eucalyptus trees.

Cass and Bruce make up part of the McCormack family, farmers and – more recently – pioneers in a very new kind of digital tech.

The McCormack’s were one of two families provided GPS cattle tags by the Mountain Cattlemen’s Association of Victoria (MCAV) as part of a grazing tool being used by the organisation.

“I joined the MCAV Board back in 2017, and over the last few years we have been looking for ways to modernise our grazing operations; as an organisation we knew we needed to monitor our cattle in a way that provided instant results for better landscape management,” Cass said.

“So far the tags have been on since December and we are really, really impressed.”

Cass has only recently become president of the MCAV, and her enthusiasm and dedication to finding new ways of dealing with old problems has seen a breath of fresh air blow through the MCAV.

“I still have a lot to learn, but there is so much knowledge in our Board that I am confident we can achieve some big things.”

The MCAV has a long and proud history of punching above its weight – most notably protesting the loss of Alpine Grazing licenses back in 2005.

At the time, hundreds of Mountain Cattlemen descended on parliament – Akubra’s, hats, dusty boots and all.

“We lost our right to graze the Alpine National Park in 2005, but we are determined to keep our State Forest Licenses,” Cass said.

“The MCAV has done great things in the past – from the grazing trial in Wonnangatta to swinging the Nunawading by-election; this new trial will make a difference for years to come and will cement grazing as a land management tool.”

The Mountain Cattlemen’s Association are using Ceres Tags, a small GPS unit that attaches to an animal’s ear and uses satellite technology to monitor movement. Grazing members of the association were invited to apply to take part in the trial and were independently selected by the MCAV Board.

When the tag data is combined with ag-based platforms it is possible to see not just where an animal is grazing but where it has been, when it has been stressed, if it is stationary or if it is being bothered by external factors such as wild dogs. There is even hope the data will be able to determine the impacts grazing can make on fire fuel loads.

“For us, the immediate difference was the set up of invisible fences,” Cass said.

“When we take our cattle to the High Country each summer, there is no fencing. In years gone by they were free to roam and that’s why they were able to keep a lid on fire fuel loads – now, there are boundaries drawn on maps - but you try and explain to the cows not to cross an invisible line!

“This new technology has meant we can create an invisible fence – when a cow gets close to the fence we get an alert on the email or mobile, and we know we need to head up and push them further within our lease area.”

Bruce, now sitting on his horse at the edge of his King Valley grazing lease, is grateful he knows where to head.

“Finding cattle, especially those that might be in trouble, can be a challenge.

“Now, I can head up with the horse and Cass can pin-point where I need to be; the technology tells me I need to check them.”

Over near Benambra and Danny Cook just about has his cattle ready to go.

He has also received the GPS tags from the MCAV and is looking forward to seeing how the technology works day-to-day.

The Cook’s have been in Benambra for six generations – and like the McCormack’s, they are determined to keep their cattle in the High Country.

Using data that can highlight grazing patterns – and the difference it can make to fuel loads – might well be the key.

“One of our key goals is to promote better land management practices in the High Country,” Cass said.

“Cattle can’t do it all, but a combination of grazing and controlled cool burns is the best way to manage the High Country environment. All the talk about bushfire has died down this summer because it’s been so wet and there is a lot of green in the country, but that will change.

“We need to work smarter, not harder, and we believe letting our cattle graze the High Country is an example of that – the GPS tags are another tool to help us with the smarter.”

For more information on the MCAV and what they do head to www.mcav.com.au