



QUEENSLAND
FARMERS'
FEDERATION



Keyboard warriors target turf farms during drought

Lessons in communications from criticism
of North Queensland turf growers

*This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation and the
Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.*

The situation

During three years of drought from 2015 to 2018, the Moncrieff family's Paragon Gardens Turf Farm in Townsville came under sustained daily trolling on social media sites for irrigating their turf and laying turf out on site.

As well as posting on group pages, the 'keyboard warriors' would take photos of trucks delivering turf to building sites and post them with questions like, 'Why are they wasting water in a drought?'

About the property

After Lachlan Moncrieff worked on local turf farms for several years, he and Sacha started Paragon Gardens in 1997, and he went on to study horticulture, landscaping and irrigation.

Nearly 30 years later, Paragon Gardens consists of 15 hectares sown to two varieties of turf, Sir Walter Soft Leaf Buffalo Grass and the drought-resistant Zoysia japonica. At the same time, Townsville's suburban sprawl is beginning to encroach on farmland.

Paragon Gardens services commercial properties, Townsville City Council, homeowners and local landscapers, including on Magnetic Island and in Charters Towers, and has sent turf as far as Burketown in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Mt Isa in the west. They employ between two and five workers, depending on the season, and Lachlan also provides a consultation service to assist clients with turf and landscaping issues.

In 2017 Lachlan was awarded a Hort Innovation scholarship to study a Masterclass in Horticultural Business, the first course of its type in Australia, offered by the University of Tasmania in conjunction with Lincoln University, New Zealand, and Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

In more recent years, Lachlan has been a Board member of Turf Queensland and a spokesperson for turf growers in North Queensland.

The Crisis Event

From 2015 to 2018, Townsville endured one of its worst droughts on record, with below average rainfall and record-breaking heat. At the time there were 21 turf farms in Townsville, but now there are just seven.

For the Moncrieffs, the hardest part wasn't the dry conditions — it was the public perception that turf growers were wasting a resource everyone else was being asked to conserve.

While the business didn't have a Facebook page at the time, Sacha would see daily posts criticising Townsville turf growers on group pages and the Council website.

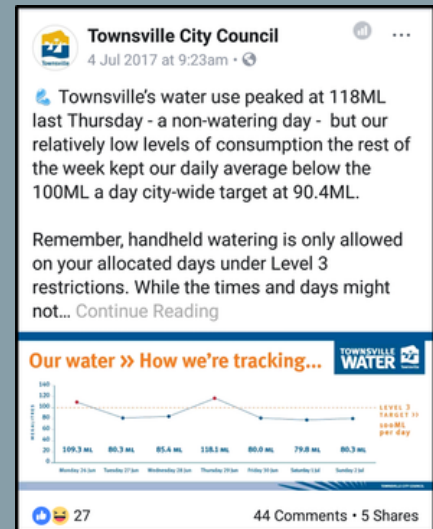
“They weren't shy about picking on us every day, rather than contacting us directly...”
Lachlan said.

Despite the drought, Townsville was growing as a city, with new housing developments encroaching into rural areas.

“At the time, the banks would not allow people to take possession of new homes until they had turf planted as part of the final valuation,” Lachlan said.

“But while we could grow as much turf as we liked, homeowners were only permitted to water for 10 days once it was laid, then after that they had to let the turf die.

“It was a very difficult time. I was also a sounding board for people in the local turf, irrigation, nursery, and lawn mowing sectors. I probably spent a couple of hours each day trying to help others get through it as well.”



The Crisis Response

The Moncrieffs turned their focus to promoting their business, building a website and presence on social media.

They promoted positive messages, including the importance of grass and the value of green space in towns and cities; its function in cleaning the air, filtering water, cooling things down and stopping runoff; and its benefits to mental health and wellbeing.

A major part of the problem was Townsville's water supply. Although Townsville's population had grown significantly over the years, the water capacity of the local Ross River Dam had not grown with it. The dam is wide and quite shallow in parts, making it vulnerable to evaporation.

“We went to the newspaper several times and talked to different radio stations about the criticism we were receiving, as well as discussing solutions for Townsville's water supply,” Lachlan said.

“We have the Burdekin Dam, one of Australia's largest dams, located just 150 kilometres from Townsville, but the cost of pumping water from the dam to the city is deemed unviable.”

The Moncrieffs sought support from Turf Australia and Turf Queensland, and were proactive in discussing the water supply challenges facing the region with local councillors and State and Federal politicians.

“No-one had a solution to the immediate problem, other than praying for rain.”



“It was an impossible situation to be in. It really did feel like we were being hung out to dry. Being in a regional area, it felt quite isolating.” Lachlan

The aftermath and lessons learned

When the drought eventually broke, Lachlan felt hugely relieved that everyone could go back to work without the stress and worry. It wasn't until then that he realised the toll it had taken.

“*The experience has made Sacha wary about expanding our business because future drought is still a real risk to our business. However, I feel confident because I have a lot more business knowledge now,” Lachlan said.*

A colleague at Turf Australia, Jenny Zadro, introduced Lachlan to QFF, where he became aware of Hort Innovation and completed the Masterclass. QFF also introduced Lachlan and Sascha to its Managing Communications in a Crisis training workshop. The training courses provided a new perspective on running their business and in dealing with critics.

“*We are now much more aware of what it costs to produce our product, where we sit in our marketplace, and what we should and can charge, as well as our water and fertiliser use.”*

Lachlan said social media has made him far more conscious of how his business — and his staff — are perceived by the public.

“*Everyone has got a camera now. I tell my workers to try their best not to do anything wrong, always remember you're representing Paragon Gardens. You just don't want to be one of those people who turn up in a video.*

“In retrospect, I think it's better to take the high road, don't go out of your way to battle with the critics,” Lachlan said. “Focus on facts and doing the right thing, like knowing the rules on water usage so you're not doing anything wrong.”

The crisis communications training workshop emphasised the importance of anticipating business and reputational risks, and the need to take time out to consider the situation before responding with factual information.

“*A lot of times I'd say don't engage unless someone is putting misinformation out there. Then I think it is important to stick up for yourselves and your industry....* Lachlan



Key lessons - Straight from Lachlan's experience:

1. Take the high road - don't go out of your way to battle with critics.
2. Only engage when misinformation is being spread - otherwise, it's often better not to feed it.
3. Know your numbers - understand your costs, your market position and your resource use so you can respond with facts, not defensiveness.
4. Remember everyone's got a camera - what your business and your staff do in public is part of your reputation, whether you're ready for it or not.



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Managing Communications During a Crisis

This project is a collaboration between the Queensland Farmers' Federation (QFF) and the Queensland Government to support Queensland farmers.

QFF is the united voice of agriculture in Queensland, representing the collective interests of peak agriculture industry organisations (both state and national) to build a strong future for Queensland's agriculture sector.

To deliver the skills and training component of the Managing Communications during a Crisis project, QFF has partnered with Blue Hill Agency – an agriculture communications company – to equip farmers with tools to better handle communication during a crisis.

This project provides training sessions for stakeholders and farmers to prepare them to navigate future crises, ensuring a coordinated and responsive communication approach that mitigates risks, enhances decision-making, and maintains the integrity of businesses during disruptive events. The goal is to build a culture of preparedness and resilience through improved communication and crisis management practices.

Scan the QR code to access resources, guides and training materials developed through this project.



Additional Media Resources

- <https://www.paragongardens.com.au/blog/surviving-water-restrictions>
- <https://www.turfbreed.com.au/townsvilles-turf-growers-revival-from-drought-economic-downturn-and-floods/>