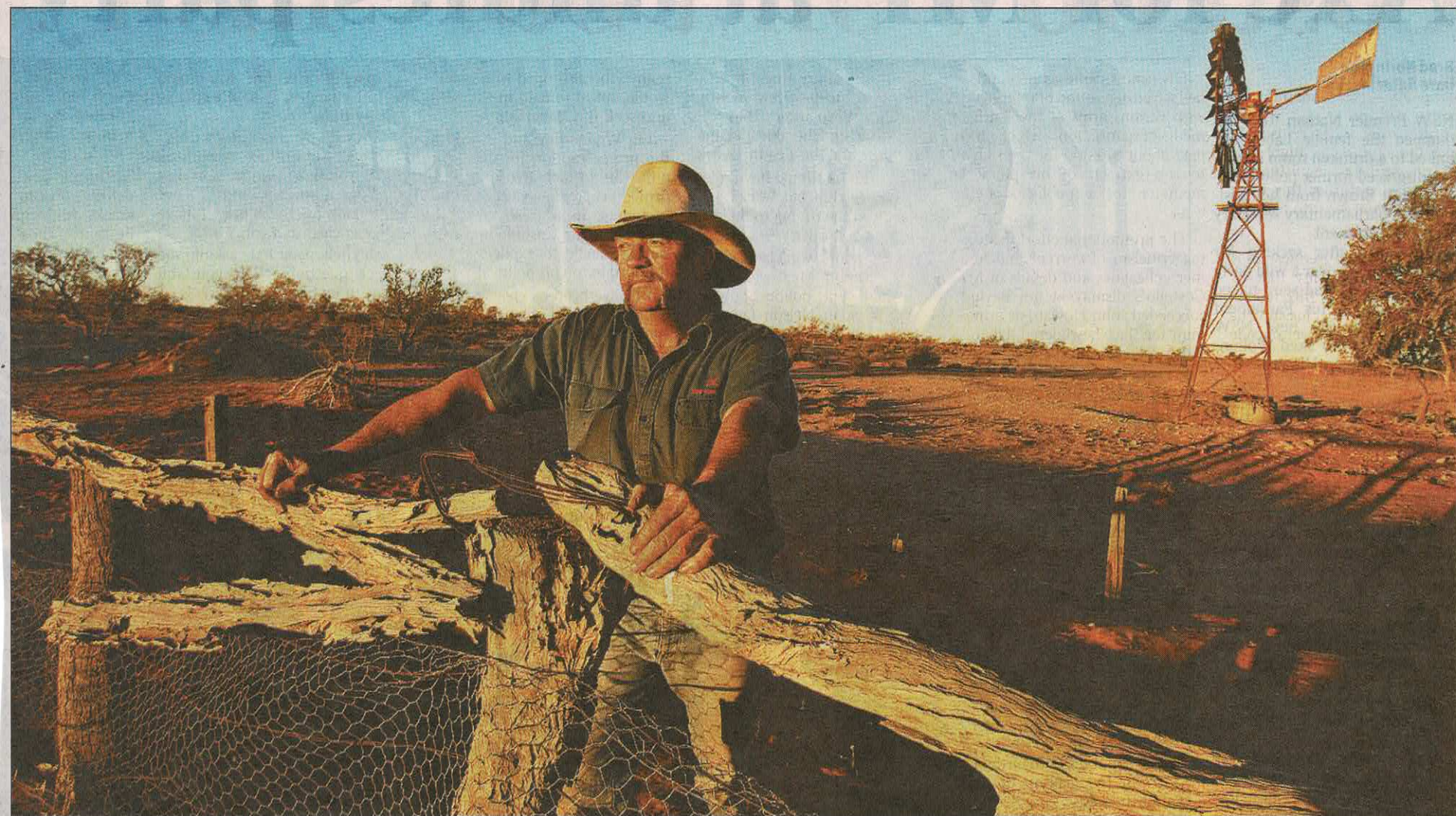


# Water dries up along with life on the land



**'Changing place':** Randall Crozier stands in a dried-up watercourse at Anna Creek cattle station in South Australia

Picture: David Geraghty

## Dan Box

RANDALL Crozier stands in the barren cattle paddock, frowning at the drought-bleached desert sand.

"Hard to imagine isn't it? This was all underwater in 2004," Crozier says. "The creek here was 300m wide."

The local Aboriginal name for the area is Wadiwarriganna, meaning "slowly moving water". Today, picked-clean cattle bones lie among the dust.

Crozier, 51, is the manager of the world's largest cattle station, Anna Creek in northern South Australia, but soon he will have no cattle to run on it.

A few days ago, his stockmen mustered the last hungry looking

cows from the 3000sq km paddock behind where he is standing. Soon they and every other animal on the property will be sold and the station left to stand empty until it rains.

"The world's a changing place," Crozier says. "The run of it here used to be that one year in every three you got a bit of a dry time, a tough year; lately it's been a little continuous."

Despite its size — at 24,000sq km, Anna Creek is bigger than Israel and uses its own road-train to shuttle herds between paddocks — the station provides a microcosm of the trials endured by rural Australia today.

The station is one among an empire of pastoral properties collected by the late Sidney Kidman, that

together, the "Cattle King" believed, could withstand any drought. But the past few years, which the Bureau of Meteorology describes as the worst since the Federation Drought more than a century ago, have savaged even Kidman's realm.

As the vegetation failed at Anna Creek, Crozier began to send his livestock away, trucking those he could to other Kidman properties although most were simply sold. A few years ago there were more than 18,000 Santa-Gertruda cattle; today there are about 1500, with the last of these expected to be gone next month.

The station's human population followed. Once, there were more than 20 stockmen; today there are just two

and they will leave within weeks. When they do only Crozier, his head stockman and the station cook will remain, waiting for rain.

"There's never been a drought in history that hasn't broken," Crozier says.

Greg Campbell, managing director of the firm Kidman founded, Kidman & Co, says the company understands that, in Australia, drought is inevitable.

The company's Macumba station, north of Anna Creek, has also been de-stocked this year. At another, Helen Springs, in the Northern Territory, the wet season failed, forcing the company to truck 36,000 cattle off the station.

It is the current combination of

drought and rising wheat and fuel prices that has hit hardest, Campbell says. Two West Australia Kidman properties, Ruby Plains and Sturt Creek have been put up for auction, but attracted no bids.

It is also becoming harder to find people to take what jobs remain. There are currently vacancies at almost every Kidman property across the country. Partly, this is the result of higher wages on offer in mining. It is also because inland Australia is becoming a tougher place to live.

An average of more than five farming families walked off the land every day in the five years before the 2006 census, according to figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.