Tropical Grassland Society of Australia Inc.

TGS news & views

about pasture development in the tropics and subtropics

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A day in the cells at Gympie

The field day on cell grazing held on Jim Viner's property near Gympie was very well attended with about 200 visitors.

We were blessed with clear skies although it was fairly warm, but good rain earlier in spring meant that the improved pastures of Tessa Vale were looking wonderful.

Visitors were shown some excellent pastures under the cell grazing system with a general impression that current stock numbers were on the low side. Even the owner confirmed that he was aiming to bring in some stock.

Any wiser?

But what did visitors actually learn about the pros and cons of cell grazing besides seeing these results in the paddock?

Field day visitors watch a mob of 450 young cattle being moved to a new grazing cell.

"That's OK in practice, but how is it in theory?" could be the theme for cell grazing.

Terry McCosker told us that the practice of time control grazing was developed by graziers and not by pasture scientists and listed the seven principles of the system's management. All these except one are part of all good grazing management; the one under question by scientists is the need for very high stocking rates (60 head/ha) to create a trampling effect.

From African savannas

The original principles for time control grazing come from Savory's observations of grazing by migratory herds of herbivores over the grasslands of Africa. These vast herds of wildebeest, impala, buffalo and zebra progress across the grasslands, grazing, trampling and moving on. Savory claimed that this short-term very heavy grazing is the right way of maintaining good pasture composition. The other (Australian-rangeland) system with 'small' numbers of stock left permanently in one area allows the animals to selectively graze the 'best' species which reduce leading to a loss of condition—something that can certainly be seen over large areas of the world.

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The theme for the day? — "Cell grazing may be OK in practice but how is it in theory?

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Society News

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Web site problems over

Our Web site problems seem to be over. The Society purchased a computer so that I can access the Internet service server direct from home, which gives me more time to play even if the loading time is slower.

I think that we have managed to get most of the content current and to tidy up the format.

We have had an offer from Rachel Shelton, our past President's daughter, to come up with a new design and look forward to this. The old design organised many years ago by John Hodgkinson has served us well.

One of my new tasks is/will be placing full pdf versions of Journal papers in an archive so that they can be retrieved electronically by search engines. So far, we have only the full issues from 2003 available but I will add the other issues as they become available from the type-setters. Practical Abstracts for the past years will remain in another archive.

Fellows

No new Fellowships have been awarded for the last couple of years because there have been no nominations. There are many worthies who have provided much to pasture science or to the Society during their working lives. Think about who has been a light to others in the pasture field and send your nomination for the year 2005 to the Secretary in an envelope marked 'Fellow Nomination in Confidence'.

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Tough times ahead for TGS

Hard decisions at the AGM

The Society is going backwards financially and could end up insolvent in a few years unless we take some actions now. Factors that lubricate the slippery slide include a big disadvantage in the exchange rate with our overseas subscriptions to libraries that used to pay in US dollars and increased costs. But our biggest problem is the small number of members.

It costs more than your subscriptions each year to print and especially to mail out the journal and the newsletter. And there would be no savings in providing some copies of the current journal on the Web in electronic form. The costs of typesetting and set-up for printing are the same for 10 copies or for 10,000 copies. Even the newsletter costs more than $25 a year to print and mail out with home-grown desktop publishing.

Newsletter $50/yr – 3 issues of journal

So the hard decisions at the AGM were to increase the dues for membership and the newsletter to $50 a year, but to keep the subscriptions for the full journal at $75 a year while reducing the number of issues to 3 per year. This will directly reduce the costs of editing (currently paid per issue), of typesetting, printing and distribution. There will be another benefit in that the editor will be able to be more selective in the papers accepted. He has been becoming increasing concerned about the scientific merit of some submitted papers.

We also appreciate that a journal whose papers cannot be accessed electronically will soon be irrelevant. All scientists use this system for searching for information rather than reading piles of hard-copy journals; even authors want to distribute pdf versions of their paper by email rather than mailing a reprint.

We are gradually placing back issues of the journal on our Web site so that they can be picked up by search engines. Back issues of the newsletter are already accessible through Google.

However, current issues of the journal will not be available so as to preserve the rights of paying members.

Treasurer's Report 2004

The cash books of the Tropical Grasslands Society have been audited and were found to be acceptable for submission to the Office of Fair Trading.

Tropical Grasslands continued to operate with expenditure greater than income with an operating loss on the completion of 30 September 2004 of $9,599.80. Although total income increased by $10,000 compared to last year (including $11,500 from ILRI), expenditure increased by $6,000. Accordingly, net assets of the Society have reduced from $87,415 to $78,343.

Income from journal subscriptions continues to decline whilst operating costs to produce the journal increased. The liquidation of our stock of books by $6,200 contributed to the increase in expenditure.

Strategic planning is required immediately to turn the operating loss into a profit to ensure the longevity of the Society.

Fluctuations in annual profit and loss over the last eight years

Year	Profit (Loss)	Comments
1997	($30,050)	Liability of $11,000 inherited from previous year. Two additional volumes published. End of high interest returns on cash investments
1998	($1,640)	Scholarships cancelled to stem losses
1999	($3,900)	
2000	$16,083	Conference at Emerald yielded profit of $12,000
2001	($7,720)	Some costs from conference were paid in 2001
2002	$3,070	Fees increased and subscriptions charged in US dollars
2003	($14,120)	Strengthening Aus dollar, member/subscriber losses, increased costs
2004	($9,599)	Increased costs, reduced Journal subscription, liquidation of stock of books

Jim Viner answers questions about his grazing management system

'Scientific' grazing management says that stocking rate is the most important factor in maintaining pasture condition, that the valuable pastures species should be spelled during the wet season periodically and that fencing and water should be adequate to ensure reasonable distribution of grazing.

And the winner is ...?

So who wins? Both sides as long as grazing land managers give more attention to their pastures.

Some of Terry McCosker's statements were highly relevant.

"Producing beef needs skills in livestock management, business management, and pasture and land management—80% of graziers have good livestock management, about 50% have good business management but less than 10% have good pasture management."

"Your system of grazing management is a life-style decision."

The idea of cell grazing is stirring up enthusiam about pasture management—and that's a good thing.

Enthusiasm stirred

My impression was that Terry was saying that grazing land management definitely needed to be improved and one way that has stirred the imagination of some of our leading graziers has been cell grazing. But Terry says that graziers do not have to rush into highly intensive cell systems with a dairy-farmer life style. Start with extra fencing subdivision and a form of rotation and increase the speed and intensity of this as the pastures respond seemed to be his message.

Scientific selection

On a scientific side, the message seems to be that forcing animals to eat plants or parts of plants that they would prefer to leave will reduce the overall quality of their diet and lead to lower production. Indeed numerous grazing experiments have confirmed that animals grow better under set-stocking but the question should be what happens to the pastures in the long term under this management. If the pasture condition declines, then so ultimately will the production from the animals.

One popular photograph (from CSIRO Townsville) encapsulates the important lesson in pasture management—the effect of constant defoliation on the root system of a grass plant.

Keep a good root system. A heavily grazed grass plant may not be able to make full use of rainfall. Grass roots also improve soil structure.

Constant heavy grazing reduces top growth and root growth; reduced root growth means that the plant cannot respond to rainfall. Is this one of the benefits of cell grazing in terms of production per millimetre of rainfall?

Trampling

I'm not sure what the benefits of trampling are and how trampling would improve soil condition.

Pasture mixtures

For many years, pasture agronomists have recommended simple, rather than 'shot-gun', pasture mixtures. The reasoning was, I think, that ultimately the best-adapted grass was going to become dominant so why waste money on seed of species that may decline. But most grass species are fairly catholic in their requirements and a mixed pasture may well provide a more varied and better nutrition. There may be other practical or commercial advantages to mixtures. The costs and availability of seed of different grasses can vary considerably while some may establish more easily than others. Thus a mixture of suitable grasses may reduce the costs and improve the establishment of a pasture. But the species chosen should all be suitable for the land and pasture use.

Soil compaction – "The sheep-foot roller wasn't designed by Mr. Sheepfoot."

"If you can't measure it, you can't manage it." Jim Viner shows his cell grazing chart of movements and stock grazing days. The plan is to calculate production and rainfall efficiency.

As Bill Burrows used to say, "The roadbuilder's compacting roller wasn't called a sheep-foot roller because it was designed by Mr. Sheep-foot".

In a wet soil, trampling may encourage a plant to root down by pressing the stems into the soil. In a moist soil, one may expect surface compaction and sealing. In a hard dry soil, there would be little effect except for loss of surface soil crumb structure. The generation of the mass of fine grass roots and their degeneration into intimately held humus are the main drivers of soil structure in non-cracking clays. So the better the root system, the better the soil structure and infiltration of rainfall. It is possible that trampling will help the breakdown of senescent grass leaves especially in improved pasture species, but probably less in our quick-maturing native grasses. These are probably best burned off in a hot fire at the end of the wet season to also reduce woody regrowth. To get a suitably hot fire, there has to be a good body of grass, which is where a suitably low stocking rate comes in. Fire is a natural component of savanna grasslands.

An excellent pasture of mixed grasses and legumes

An excellent pasture of rhodes grass, digitaria and creeping blue grass with Villomix jointvetches.

We saw an excellent pasture of a mix of Rhodes grass, digit grasses, setaria and creeping blue with the legumes Villomix (*Aeschynomone villosa* cultivars Reid and Kretschmer) and clover and lucerne. Some visitors said that they found that creeping blue grass became too dominant and pushed out other species and any legumes. Creeping blue is better suited to areas with moderate soil fertility subject to heavy grazing pressures.

Ian Partridge

And special thanks to Graeme Elphinstone for his great compering of the day despite the broken foot.

Cell grazing and science

from John McIvor, CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, St Lucia

The claims

"*Cell grazing has doubled our productivity and further increases are possible as degraded areas around old waters recover from years of misuse.*"

"*The big benefits of changing management have not only been the change for the better in our pastures but a drastic reduction in pasture maintenance costs, increased carrying capacity and increased profitability.*"

"That's OK in practice but how is it in theory?"

These claims have been made by producers using cell grazing, and there is no reason to doubt their sincerity. But they also changed their levels of interest and intensity of management and their infrastructure, while the amount and distribution of rainfall was difference from before.

Are the changes in performance due to changes in grazing system or to other factors?

Scientists need facts

It is the prerogative of landholders to spend their time and money as they wish, but any recommendation or endorsement by scientists has to be backed by the basic principles of plant growth or by rigorously analysed data from trials conducted over a number of years. And there is little scientific data for cell grazing tropical pastures in Australia.

A large mob of steers and heifers graze a cell below a commercial pine plantation on thin hill soil.

From basic principles

Over the last decades, major points of difference between promoters of cell grazing and the scientists included claims such as Savory's that:

"*As a general rule, the conventional or government-prescribed stocking rates can safely be doubled in the first year of operation as long as adequate time control is brought into grazing handling. Furthermore this doubling of government or conventional rates can be done regardless of how poor the range condition is at the time.*"

Most pasture scientists found it difficult to believe that:

- stocking rates could be safely doubled on land already stocked at carrying capacity just by changing the grazing system. If anything, stocking rates on much country should be reduced.
- hoof action from large herds would lead to greater litter formation, chipping of surface soil crusts improving aeration, infiltration and seedling establishment.

General findings

General findings by reviewing grazing systems in Australia suggest:

- Stocking rate has a major impact on range condition and animal production.
- Grazing system was much less important than the stocking rate.
- Little apparent difference between continuous and rotational grazing systems.
- Few paddock systems were the same as multi-paddock systems.
- Regular spelling is needed to restore condition.

As a result, simple grazing systems with opportunistic management have been recommended.

But few of the studies reviewed included cell grazing systems with many paddocks (usually 20 or more) where stock movement

is based on the growth rate of the pasture and its need for rest.

What qualifies for cell grazing?

For management to be called cell (or time-control) grazing, at least the first 5 of the following principles have to be followed:

1. Control rest to suit the growth rate of the plant
2. Adjust stocking rate to match carrying capacity
3. Plan, monitor and manage grazing
4. Use short grazing periods to increase animal performance
5. Use maximum stock density for the minimum time
6. Use diversity of plants and animals to improve ecological health
7. Use large mob size to encourage herding.

Those plant principles again

For cell grazing to improve animal production where pasture is the limiting factor, it would have to increase:

1. quantity of pasture produced
2. quality of the pasture produced
3. amount eaten.

Grazing systems aim to manipulate these three factors by controlling the frequency and severity of defoliation to prevent overgrazing.

1. Quantity of pasture produced

Over the long term, grazing systems may alter land condition and thus pasture production. Land in poor condition (severe erosion, bare ground, few perennial grasses, many weeds) may produce only 10-20% of the herbage from land in good condition (no erosion, little bare ground, dominated by 3P grasses, few weeds).

In the short-term, after a pasture plant is defoliated, its rate of growth increases initially, reaches a maximum, and then declines. Thus the amount of pasture produced over a year will be greatest when the regrowth periods equal the time taken for the pasture to reach its maximum growth rate.

However, growing conditions are not constant, and it is difficult to predict the regrowth period that allows yields to be maximised.

Also, the death rate of the herbage increases with time. Thus the regrowth period for maximum rate of accumulation of ***green*** material is shorter than the regrowth period giving maximum ***total*** pasture yield.

Longer regrowth periods give higher yields but shorter regrowth periods give a higher proportion of green material in the pasture.

Grazing trials in South Africa and Texas have suggested that systems with many paddocks *may* give a small advantage in pasture growth over systems with fewer paddocks.

2. Quality of pasture produced

Some Australian reports show that perennial grasses and native legumes increase with cell grazing.

The legumes should be beneficial for pasture quality but what about the extra perennial grass? Young green leaves are the highest quality part of a grass plant; the more of these in the diet the higher the diet quality; conversely, as animals consume older green leaf, dry leaf or stem diet quality declines.

In the early wet season, liveweight gains increase as grass yield increased – more grass means more young green leaf for animals.

But in the summer, individual animals *at low stocking rates* on poor condition pastures can grow faster than those on good condition pastures because the annual grasses produce more green leaf—until they die out! Poorer condition pastures grow less herbage and cannot support higher stocking rates where pastures dominated by higher yielding perennial grasses produce the highest gains.

Conclusion: grazing systems may increase or decrease pasture quality and liveweight gain may also increase or decrease.

3. Amount of pasture consumed

More paddocks means smaller paddocks and more even coverage and utilisation—up to a limit.

Conclusion: greater pasture utilisation in small paddocks can increase animal production per hectare.

Some issues

1. Matching stocking rate and carrying capacity

Old claims that stocking rates could be doubled with cell grazing have thankfully been abandoned.

All now agree with the principle "Adjust stocking rate to match carrying capacity".

2. Animal production

From our discussion of pasture growth, quality and utilisation, animal production could increase, decrease or stay the same with cell grazing compared to other grazing systems.

Under continuous grazing, individual animals can select the highest quality diet (although this might ultimately have deleterious effects on pasture composition). If animals are forced to eat older material, or the pasture has lower quality due to species changes, they are likely to grow more slowly.

On an area basis, better utilisation with smaller paddocks should increase animal production.

But would this reduce the gains by each animal? Can bullocks be fattened in cell grazing systems or is it more suited pre-feedlot?

3. Soil impacts

Does hoof impact from very high stock densities lead to greater litter formation, does chipping surface soil crusts improve aeration, infiltration and seedling establishment?

Most work says not; generally grazing adversely affects soil physical properties. Heavy trampling reduces infiltration rate, increases sediment run-off and soil compaction. Spelling pastures will improve soil physical characteristics with time, but may need longer periods than the rests in cell grazing.

Does hoof action from very high stock density improve or damage the soil?

4. Importance of spelling

Pasture spelling is an integral part of cell grazing and most members of the scientific community consider some spelling is at least desirable, if not essential. For instance, the Ecograze project conducted near Charters Towers concluded, "The value of wet season spelling is enormous and where a wet season spelling regime can be implemented it can provide increased flexibility to enterprise management."

Grasses are most sensitive to defoliation when regrowing (e.g. in the early wet season) so spelling is likely to be most beneficial at this time. Provided pastures are not grazed at the same time in the season each year, cell grazing will provide this rest in most years.

But could other less complex systems also do this? The Ecograze project concluded "Wet season spelling can be implemented using fairly simple two, three or four paddock grazing systems."

Do we need 20 or more paddocks to effectively spell pastures?

5. Other matters

Other issues besides those considered in scientific research include:

Labour. Animals under cell grazing become quieter, and so are easy to muster, move and handle; there are fewer mobs to care for; it is easy to supplement through one water system; and there are fewer water points to check. On the other hand, somebody must be present to shift the cattle as required and to monitor the pasture growth. It is the manager's personal life-style decision whether to be tied to stock constantly.

Infrastructure requirements. Much more fencing is required for small paddocks but with electric fencing this may not be a large issue. However, water supply may be. Good quality water is important and the pipe lines and troughs must be adequate to handle large mobs.

Are increases in animal production sufficient to cover these costs?

Future

There has been limited scientific research on cell grazing in Australia. Meat & Livestock Australia has recently commissioned a project by DPI and CSIRO to compare grazing systems (including cell grazing) in Queensland. In four years time, I hope we will be able to tell you whether the theory is as good as the claimed practice.

Reflections on the day in the cells

Lyle Winks

I was certainly impressed with the way Jim Viner has set up his property and with the military precision with which the property is run. His passion for what he is doing is obvious, as is his commitment to making things work in a way that he perceives is most efficient. While I came away from the field day with some clear messages, some issues were left unresolved for me.

The clear messages I gleaned from the day were:

- Practitioners and scientists seem to disagree on the value of cell grazing.
- The cell grazing system as demonstrated would take a lot of effort and considerable cost to set up and would be time-consuming to operate (could be almost as big a tie as dairying!!!).
- Cell grazing appears good for pastures, if Jim's pastures are a typical example.

But the unresolved issues were:

How good is cell grazing for cattle?

Peter Hughes stressed that he considers cell grazing stresses cattle. He suggested a third of the animals do well, a third cope and a third do not cope. During the afternoon session, this statement was not refuted. I can accept that this system would stress cattle as Peter suggests. People become stressed in large crowds and I can see no reason why the same principles would not operate with cattle. Always being in close proximity to others and competing strongly for space and food must place stresses on animals, which individuals would cope with to varying degrees. It was not resolved to my satisfaction how operators overcome the stress factor in cell grazing. Terry McCosker is very conscious of the impact of stress on cattle and indicated that stress is a critical issue in performance of beef cattle. He suggested that considerable effort must be directed to minimising animal stress (destressing cattle) in any beef production business and talked about Jim Lindsay's destressing schools. Even if a grazier attended one of these schools, I could not see how this would overcome the stresses which operate with large mobs of cattle.

A closely related factor was Terry's statement (my interpretation) that the level of performance achieved in cell grazing is a function of the stock density. As the density in an individual paddock increases, the production will plateau at a higher level. I assume that this is at a given stocking rate. This suggests that cattle should be more concentrated, which would exacerbate any stress-related issues that arise with large mobs in small areas. In addition, it automatically means the more paddocks the better, and cattle should be shifted more frequently. This seems to be at variance with published work from South Africa (as indicated by John McIvor). There is no argument about the need to spell pastures, the question is:

To what extent should areas be broken up?

My understanding is that current thinking is that **season-long rests at regular and frequent intervals are more important than grazing systems.**

The recommendation is to impose season-long rests every 3-4 years with recommended stocking rates, requiring 4 paddocks. Number of paddocks per group of animals, and periods in and periods out of those paddocks within a season, are considered relatively unimportant in terms of the effects of grazing on vigour of the pasture. Terry indicated that this system is good for the pasture but not the animals. One might expect the stress factor to be less under this system as cattle would have more room to spread and would shift less frequently.

Dispenser meters nitrogen supplement into the piped water supply

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Cell grazing and the grazier

Cell grazing – part of a whole

Terry McCosker of Resource Consulting Services was one of the invited speakers. Although Terry is a proponent of cell grazing, he did not limit his talk to this subject—as befits his view (and the tone of his highly regarded workshops) that cell grazing is but one part of overall or holistic management.

The 3-legged pot

Thus Terry started with his well-known 3-legged pot—with legs representing management of the business, of livestock and of land and pastures. If one leg is weak, the pot tips over. His feeling is that 80-90% of graziers are good livestock managers, about 50% are good business managers but maybe only 5-10% are good grazing land managers.

"If one leg is weak, the pot will ..."

Beef producers are under the constant squeeze of declining terms of trade and, as businesses seeking to maintain income levels, have to reduce their overheads, increase their gross margins and increase turn-over.

Livestock management

Profit is derived from reproduction and growth of stock and will be highest when their health, stress levels and nutrition are optimised. Animal health is not a major problem thankfully in Australia and stress is reduced by correct and regular handling as a herd—hence the benefit of regular handling of large mobs of cattle in cell grazing. But nutrition (from the pasture resource) is the major factor in good growth and reprod-uction. Water quality is being increasingly recognised for its importance with some 80% of properties having problems. Cattle drink less of poor quality water and then eat less. Cattle may drink 15% less from poor quality dam water than from clean trough water and grow 25% more slowly.

"Any rest from grazing is good for the pasture."

Land and pasture management

Pasture and land management is the core to improving the biological efficiency of a grassland ecosystem.

Many systems of grazing can be used:

- continuous grazing
- rotational grazing with resting or spelling
- rotating stock around a small number of paddocks (4-6) as on large properties in western Queensland
- multi-camp rotational grazing with cattle moved around say 20 paddocks every 3-4 days on a calendar basis.

Time control or cell grazing

Cell grazing is claimed to improve the ecosystem so as to use rainfall and sunlight more efficiently.

Seven principles of cell grazing

- Rest
- Stocking rate to match carrying capacity
- Planning and monitoring
- Short grazing period
- High density of stock (60/ha)
- Management of livestock
- Biodiversity.

Terry suggested that, rather than rushing into a full cell grazing operation, graziers could start with a few paddocks, then intensify. After a few years the pastures should improve and stock density will plateau; at this stage more subdivision will further productivity.

"Manage pastures for the good species and not for the weeds."

Suits some, not others

Terry's final point was that cell grazing is not a panacea. It's a tool that suits some people.

People and families need to balance the time they spend working, the money they want or need and their general welfare or happiness. Many beef producers do not wish to return to daily management of stock and the cloak of 'dairy farming'.

"Your system of grazing management is life-style decision."

Subdivision and extra water

Peter Hughes was the last speaker and kept his talk on a more general level about the beef industry and property management, without weighing strongly into the cell grazing debate.

However, he said that he felt that extra fencing for subdivision and better distribution of water supplies were keys to better and more even utilisation of the land.

He agreed on the need spell to allow grasses to recover but was concerned that large mobs of cattle might encourage, rather than allay, stress because he didn't like to see cattle bunched up and waiting to move.

Reflections on the day in the cells. Continued from page 9

Need for medicated water?

Jim feeds medicaments in the drinking water all-year-round. The principal nutrients appear to be nitrogen, phosphorus and trace elements. I came away not knowing what testing was performed to justify this feeding (it may have been mentioned when I was not present). Jim did state that he was confident he obtained responses, but I assumed this was based on visual observation.

It did seem surprising that, with very good improved pastures and an 1800 mm rainfall environment, Jim needs to send his stock to a feedlot to be finished for the EU market. I would have expected gains to be good enough to achieve EU weights on the pastures we saw by the correct age.

Can MLA project resolve beliefs?

Another issue which concerns me was that MLA is to expend levy-payers' funds on a project to examine grazing systems. This will apparently examine cell grazing systems. However, the main proponent of these systems (Terry McCosker) does not seem to be involved in the project. As a member of MLA and a levy payer, I find such an arrangement totally unacceptable. As indicated above, practitioners and scientists seem to disagree on the value of cell grazing, despite the wealth of research results from overseas. Why will a study done by scientists change the views of the practitioners? It is essential that Terry is involved in the exercise in discussing and debating what should be examined and in monitoring what is done. If the study is done without Terry's involvement, I fail to see why anything will change, regardless of the outcome.

(Editor's note: The MLA team say they will keenly seek Terry's views and experiences but wish to remain totally objective about all sources of information)

Jim Viner's cell grazing steers drink clean water supplemented with chelated nitrogen.

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TGS news & views

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