

# Native pasture management in the Hunter Valley

Richard Marshall<sup>1</sup> and Neil Nelson<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mt Kia-Ora, Bowmans Creek, Singleton, NSW, 2330

<sup>2</sup> NSW Agriculture, Singleton, NSW, 2330

In the Mid-Hunter region where beef production relies heavily on native and unimproved pastures, experience suggests that cattle lose weight before ground cover declines below the 70% soil erosion benchmark (Lang, 1979). Accordingly, it is important to quantify pasture conditions conducive to

liveweight maintenance (and gain) and develop pasture yield and quality benchmarks that determine management decisions. To examine the relationship between pasture characteristics and cattle performance a project was developed by the Singleton Beef & Land Management Association.

## Methods

Assessment of pasture yield and quality (CP, ME) were undertaken on native pasture at five sites in conjunction with measurement of LWG of weaner cattle. Two sites used heifers and three sites steers. Stocking rate varied according to producer management and was reduced at each site with the onset of drought. The project commenced in August 1993 and concluded in June 1995.

## Results

The highest quality pasture was only available to stock when there was low herbage mass on offer. Native grass species varied greatly in their feed quality. In June 1994, weeping grass (*Microleana stipoides*) provided the highest quality feed (12% CP and 8.6 MJ/kg ME) while other species such as blady grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) and poa tussock (*Poa labillardieri*) were of very low quality (5.4%

CP and 7.0 MJ/kg ME and 5.3% CP and 6.3 MJ/kg ME respectively). However neither pasture yield nor quality were good indicators of animal performance; Grazfeed predictions underestimated cattle performance where pasture yield and pasture quality were low. Presumably, cattle exerted strong preferential grazing for high quality components.

The project has challenged beef producers to look at their present management of native pastures and to develop alternative management strategies based on new skills. As a result, co-operation in group activities has increased and beef producers understanding of the complexity of animal/pasture interaction and native pasture recognition skills have improved.

## Acknowledgment

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## References

- Lang, R.D. (1979). The effects of groundcover on surface run-off from experimental plots, *Journal of Soil Conservation*, 35: 108-114.