Pastures for beef production

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TWYNAM BEEF OVERVIEW

The Twynam Agricultural Group consists of 16 properties totalling 400,000 hectares, all in NSW along the inland rivers with the main focus on cotton production, ginning and marketing. Other cropping enterprises include irrigated rice, sorghum, maize, sweet corn, and dryland wheat, canola, and chickpeas.

Livestock enterprises total 550,000 DSE's, that include a 500 cow Angus Stud, 16,000 commercial Angus and Hereford/Santa cross cows to calve, 1,600 commercial Angus cows joined to Wagyus, 3,000 Stud Merinos, 65,000 commercial merino ewes and 50,000 wethers. Two feedlots have a total capacity of 16,000 head.

Thirteen properties run cattle with 12 of them running multiple livestock, dryland and irrigation enterprises. Only Angus bulls are currently being used in the commercial beef herds producing 400 kg Jap feeder steers at 18 months of age. We aim to produce 360 to 380 kg feeders steers at weaning. To do this we need top pastures, top genetics and well trained motivated staff.

BEEF PROFITABILITY

Compared with other Twynam enterprises the returns per hectare from commercial cattle are lower. While in recent years cattle have been more profitable than sheep, long term this occurs for only 15% of the time.

Ball-park trading profit for Stud Cattle and Stud sheep is $50 per DSE, Flock ewes $35 per DSE and Commercial beef $25 per DSE.

As a result, all other enterprises get 'first pick' of the country. Cattle graze on non-arable areas, rocky, timbered, and or flood prone country.

While we should always be trying to reduce our costs of production Twynam beef enterprises meet the benchmarks normally set by industry for cost of production indicators. To improve our beef profitability our clear focus is on lifting income through increased beef production per DSE.

Better pastures, better genetics and better stockmanship are the key items in delivering the extra productivity required particularly in the more 'difficult' country on which we run our cattle.

As a general rule, weight gains and fertility are highest on southern Twynam properties and gradually reduce up through the western river plains to northern NSW.

IMPROVING PASTURES IN NON-ARABLE AREAS

With the move to precision dryland farming, Twynam has very few areas where cropping is followed by a grazing phase. Where these cropping/grazing rotations do exist the cost of pasture establishment is seen as a 'cropping' responsibility, to restore the paddock to a sustainable or original state after the initial tillage and cropping phase. The cost of $150 per hectare to establish pasture after a winter crop harvest, with further increases in costs in lesser country as the probability of establishment decreases, can not be justified with returns per hectare from beef.

As the large majority of Twynam cattle graze non-arable or high risk flood prone country, it is the "livestock" responsibility to preserve the country in a sustainable and / or original state and must be achieved without a tractor.

Our focus on improving rangeland beef pastures, on nearly all the properties, is by non arable means.

TWYNAM GRAZING STRATEGY

- The bigger picture items need to be right first.
- Keep the calendar of events simple, and do the basics better than anyone else.
- Run a minimum number of enterprises per property.
- Run enterprises that are well suited to the property.
- Train staff and celebrate success.
- Match staff to the enterprises suited to the property.
- Know your markets.

  Then;
- Synchronise pasture availability and livestock demand by maximising stocking rate flexibility

  Minimise the number of mobs that must be kept separate.

  Aim for 15 to 20% of total DSE's to be dry DSE's particularly coming into calving

  Keep the herd structure as young as possible.

  Have the capacity to move large numbers quickly
- Remove stock from pastures at crucial times

  Swamps

  Weed control

  Seed set
- Plan drought management and options well in advance.

- Plan to turn stock off at the best times for your country.
- Slowly rotate a sheep free paddock (2-3 years) to regenerate shrubs and trees.
- Prioritise a few paddocks to improve as part of a bigger whole farm plan.
- Protect ground cover and encourage perennials and build up seed reserves
- Keep diesel away from livestock as much as possible.
- Ideally have a spread of calving dates between properties.
- Have well educated cattle, weaning takes longer but it is well worth it
- Farm layout should facilitate efficient mustering and droving.
- With keen observation of the whole environment it enables you to pick up early, all the clues it offers you.

Other Strategies we use

- Manure spreading
- Targeted fertilisers
- Strip sowing Mitchell Grass, Purple Pigeon, Bambatsi Panic

ENCOURAGING NON-ARABLE PASTURE MAINTENANCE

The cost of beef pasture maintenance on non-arable highly variable country must also be kept in balance with the cost of buying a close or adjoining paddock. It may be cheaper in the long run to buy extra country instead of risking tractor orientated pasture improvement. The balance of these issues can vary within a paddock, and obviously between paddocks and between properties.

In a management sense, should pasture maintenance and or improvement be seen as an operating or capital expense and does it matter?

In a financial sense, repairing the asset is an operating expense, but purchasing an asset is a capital expense.

In a cropping rotation, pasture improvement is an operating expense. Buying more country to reduce the stocking rate per hectare to allow the existing country to repair itself, is regarded as a capital expense and does not offer the same tax advantages.

Lowering the stocking rate on existing country is an operating cost. If non-arable pastures deteriorate, the value of the land reduces, and a capital loss occurs.

There needs to be more creative tax deductions and concessions for a broader range of options for improving non-arable pastures.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

R&D on better pasture species and establishment methods continues but more work should be done in this area with the billions of dollars being spent on environmental sustainability. More money should be spent on pasture research and development compared with resources being spent on more topical environmental issues.

More palatable, higher protein and productive native and improved perennials are required. A summer legume would assist greatly in northern areas. Best Management Practices need to be established by groups of local farmers with keen interest in pasture improvement from all over Australia, placed on the MLA website and well marketed.