

Treechangers - 50% and increasing the beef supply Growing big, healthy and happy Angus cattle on the NSW Mid-North Coast

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Dingo Bend Angus, 91 Koocumbat Lane, Bobin NSW 2429

Introduction

Elissa and I both worked in the Sydney corporate world for more than 20 years; companies such as Kellogg Australia, Nestle Australia and more recently Boehringer Ingelheim Pty Limited.

We decided in about 2000 that there had to be more to life than sitting in traffic jams or in front of computer screens and that the alternative of owning some land and running cattle seemed like a fairly idyllic lifestyle change for us. How wrong were we?

We now work seven days a week and are on call 24 hours—actually makes corporate life seem peaceful and our quarter acre city block so much easier to maintain. Yet there is something strangely more fulfilling now in what we are currently doing.

The thought of going fishing, camping or taking short holiday breaks quickly disappears once you have a herd of cattle depending on you. That is a guarantee.

Yes, it has been very hard work and an extremely steep learning curve for both of us, lots of ups and downs and more reason for argument, especially around the cattle yards, but we are now much happier and relaxed.

Our operation

Dingo Bend is a 140 ha beef grazing property, situated in the Manning Valley of NSW, approximately twenty minutes from Wingham.

The property is bisected by Dingo Creek, a permanent tributary of the Manning River and therefore the source of our all year round water supply; this is further supplemented by nine dams.

During the past four years that we have worked and lived at Bobin, we have steadily built our herd numbers up to approximately 140 head, comprising approximately:

50 breeders

40 calves (spring and autumn calving)

8 bulls (only want one, the other seven are always for sale)

20 replacement heifers or sell

20 steers

The above list comprises mostly Angus Australia registered black cattle, commercial black Angus and a few Angus/Limousin cross.

We breed and grow our own steers out to two years old or approximately 550-600kg, targeting the Jap Ox market and sell directly to Wingham Beef Exports.

Now that we have a good base of cattle to work with, our longer term plan is to improve our herd's genetic performance and provide good seed stock for coastal beef producers whilst maintaining our own cash flow via the Jap Ox steers.

That is basically the plan. And what we have, is too many cattle, not enough feed and an inconsistent cash flow. So how do we do it and how do we manage?

Buy smart

Once we had decided that the city life was no longer for us, we proceeded to search for a suitable property. This search lasted almost three years until we found what we were looking for. We only had a few key criteria. The property:

- must have a good permanent water source
- must have existing infrastructure (fencing, sheds, yards etc)
- must be within 4-5 hours drive of Sydney.

Maintain a cash flow

You purchase the farm— or you think you do, but all you really have is a big block of land that needs the mortgage paid, the land maintained and improved if you wish to make a living.

The thought of the capital infrastructure required to work a property of 140 ha didn't really enter into the equation. Give up the job, move to the country, run a few cows etc....too easy!

Wrong!

As every farmer knows you must maintain a cash flow to keep in business, whether this is by selling milk, grain or beef etc. You need an income, and farms can be low margin and inconsistent income streams (a black hole almost).

We have been extremely lucky from this perspective in that when both Elissa and I resigned from our corporate roles to live in the country, the company which I work for (Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica) asked if I was willing to continue my current role, except via the Internet.

Six months has turned into four years, and the arrangement is still working to our mutual benefit (well, it certainly benefits us) and has provided us with the valuable 'off farm' income required to survive.

Our advice to anyone contemplating a similar move is, don't try to do everything at once. We purchased our property seven years ago, agisted the land for three years before making the permanent move and I have maintained an off farm income for the past four years to set ourselves up.

Learn how to grow grass

Another key learning for us was that to grow cattle to 600 kg by the time they are two years old is not easy. If it was I think everyone would be doing it.

We were also told, "You cannot grow big cattle on the coast".

So with both these facts we thought that we had better find out:

- why not?
- why is it so hard? and
- why don't they grow big cattle on the coast?

We were also forced to ask, "Have we purchased in the wrong place?" Bugger!

Despite being raised on a coastal dairy farm myself, things had changed significantly. The world had moved on in the past thirty years since the days when my parents raised and supported a family milking 30-40 dairy cows.

So we enrolled in a Department of Primary Industries (DPI) Prograze course. Here we learnt that if you do not feed your cattle then they will not grow. (I do recall my father saying something similar to me.)

We figured out that carpet grass, kikuyu and paspalum were not going to be able to deliver what we were expecting.

We also learnt that during winter these grasses don't grow that much and were therefore not available all year round. (See pasture growth chart for the Mid North Coast).

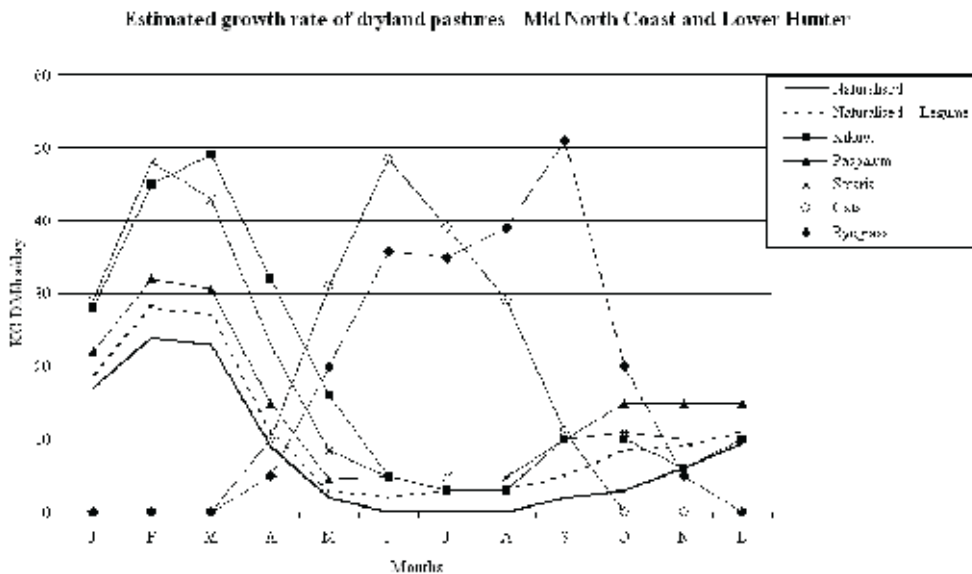
We farm in a temperate climate. This means in summer/autumn we normally have a lot of feed, but during winter/early spring, things are not so good.

We also learnt that there is a big difference between quantity and quality, and this is a concept which we intend to apply to our cattle breeding program also.

Therefore, armed with some advice from our local DPI Senior Research Agronomist (Terry Launders), we have set about improving our pastures to enable us to grow big healthy and happy cattle. Here's what we've been doing:

Winter/spring feed:

Mixture of Saia oats, Crusader/Italian ryegrass, Haifa White and NZ Red clovers



Planted in late March and Early April

Normally oversown onto mulched creek flats and fertile ridges (zero till)

Strip grazed and back-fenced during winter and early spring

Cut for silage during October/November (about 300 large round bales)

Cattle strip grazed and feed silage throughout winter.

Summer/autumn feed:

Nothing yet, have thought about it, however the above planting normally takes us through to December at which time our temperate summer grasses have kicked in and feed is again plentiful.

Improved existing pastures with Haifa white clovers.

Annual fertiliser program:

Soil tests. No point adding fertiliser if you don't need to (beef grazing operation only)

Chicken litter used to increase base nutrient levels and it's relatively cheaper

Annual fertiliser program (long term) developed with the aid of the local DPI agronomist.

To sum up, we figured out that to grow big healthy, happy steers (of a *Bos taurus* genetic background) on the coast you must feed them properly. This is not 'rocket science'. It seems simple, but in fact is a very complex and intensive all-year-round operation. As a dairy farmer neighbour of ours commented once, "You do everything the same except milk them".

Use contractors and technology

We use contractors to assist us in various areas of our operation. Initially we tried to do everything ourselves, cattle work, fences, tractor work etc.

However, being a paid-by-the-hour contractor myself, I realised that time is actually money. I concluded that I should do what I am trained to do and that we should use people who are experts in their fields, which in turn supports local businesses.

We discovered that our local artificial breeding contractor was not only good at AI-ing cows but that he was also an excellent help around the cattle yards. It resulted in reduced stress levels for us, because if you are going to have an argument with your partner then 9 times out of 10 it is in

and around the cattle yards (not sure if anyone else has noticed this correlation?).

When it comes to fencing, fix the break/damage as soon as you see it or else it just never gets done. For bigger jobs, get someone who knows what they are doing, has all the equipment. Have them quote the job, do the job—problem resolved.

Then there's the local veterinarian. If you have a sick animal or are not sure about some animal health issue then call your local veterinarian. Do not just let the animal suffer or die. This may be viewed as a cost or that it is too expensive. Instead, you should view it as an investment. These animals are your income, if you lose that income then you do not have a business, so it needs to be considered as an investment.

Production animal welfare will be the 'next big social trend' in the coming years. Many animal farmers that I know are already ahead of this trend.

Silage-making is another area to consider. We produce between 200 and 300 large round bales of silage each year for winter feed. We initially looked at purchasing the equipment, however we could not justify the investment or the time spent making the silage. It makes better sense to employ a good reliable contractor each year.

Think about a farm assistant too. When I am away from the farm for other work commitments it makes sense to have a farm assistant who is reliable and honest. We have an arrangement whereby we share the employment with a neighbour. This enables us to benefit from having assistance every second week. We are happy, our neighbour is happy and between the two of us we provide a full time employment position that neither of us individually could sustain.

Finally, technology. A good cattle management system and computer are essential. They make life easier for the management of cattle records, however make sure that it is correct system for your needs. We purchased a system and then discovered that despite being fairly computer literate, having a number of years experience, you virtually needed a PhD to operate the system. The internet is also a powerful way of

obtaining information on all sorts of cattle and pasture issues.

Cattle overview

When we first moved to being full time farmers (my wife Elissa being the main farmer) we needed some cattle to start off with and having no plan, little auction/sale yard experience and little idea of what we wanted, it was quite daunting.

We were very lucky to be introduced to two local beef farming identities, Neil Robinson (local agronomist and neighbour) and Trevor Cleaver (local well-known beef cattle grazier) who basically sat down with us both and asked us what we wanted to do. (Blank looks at times I can assure you).

Trevor actually escorted us to a number of local sales and assisted us to purchase cattle and give general cattle advice. (What to look for, what to avoid)

Neil assisted us with both agronomy and cattle advice. We are both eternally grateful to both these gentlemen as it was always forthright, accurate and sound advice.

A third person who has always given us sound advice was the cattle buyer for Wingham Beef Exports (WBE): how to prepare the steers for market, what specifications are required to obtain the best price – this is all useful information.

We have since evolved and grown our cattle operation, learning all the time, improving pastures to enable to carry more and more cattle all the while this was making us busier and busier.

Spring and autumn calving

Cycling for AI

Joining

One bull + back up bull

Four to five different mobs of cattle at any one time

Drenching

Vaccinating

Ear tagging

Weight recording

Yard weaning

Registration for Angus Australia

Selling to WBE

The paper work and administration

They get sick, they have calving issues, some die (not many) and you constantly need to have feed for them to go onto—it's a never ending cycle

Summary

Believe it or not we actually enjoy our property. It is fun. If it wasn't we certainly would not be doing what we currently do.

This may be an old cliché, however we actually believe that the health of our herd starts with our pastures. If you feed and look after your animals correctly then they will grow, be happy and healthy and it will make life so much easier.

This is one fact that has never really changed and people who own and farm animals understand this intricately.

The past two years we have focused most of our energy on constantly improving our pastures. This will not stop but be ongoing. Our next step will be to work on improving the quality of our herd further.

As we are a small property our goal must always be on quality rather than quantity. As mentioned, this concept dictates almost everything we do

To answer my initial question, we definitely think that the grass is greener on the Mid-North Coast. After all we average around 1,200 mm of reliable rainfall each year—it should be greener, shouldn't it?

Loyal, hardworking and always there when you need us...



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