

## Pastures for prosperity — Beef coastal forum.

### 2. Grazing in the nineties — The role of improved pastures

JOHN COX

*“Glensfield”, Sarina, Queensland, Australia*

#### Introduction

I am sure most people here today would agree, operating a cattle property in the nineties is a vastly different operation from years gone by. By that I mean, it is far more intensive with improved carrying capacities through improved breeds of cattle, improved pastures, improved supplementary feeding techniques, and mechanisation advancements through motor bikes, helicopters, trucks and 4-wheel drives.

A number of changes have occurred as a result of research, trials and improved work practices, leading to advancements for the industry as a whole. Equally though, changes have occurred purely through economic necessity. Farmers have had to increase carrying capacity to produce sufficient income merely to survive. This of course leads to better farm practices suffering in the name of economic survival.

#### Background

Our family conducts a cattle business in the central coast region around Proserpine. The business comprises a 14 000 ha breeding block at Collinsville, a 4000 ha breeding block in the Sarina Range area and an 8000 ha fattening block at Proserpine.

The Collinsville block, “Belmore”, has some brigalow and river flat country, but is predominantly forest ridges with box and ironbark timber. The Sarina block, “Glensfield”, is best described as coastal speargrass country with creek flats, and normally enjoys a good rainfall. The main

fattening property is “Goorganga”, which is coastal swamps and marine plains. The entire property is now covered in either para grass swamps or pangola flats.

All store steers, cull heifers and cull cows from the breeder blocks are sent to Proserpine for fattening. These numbers are supplemented by purchases of an additional 500 head per year to give a yearly turnoff of approximately 2000 fat cattle.

Male cattle are aimed at the Japanese market with a target of 300 kg dressed weight at 3 years of age, to capitalise on price premiums. The steers are normally grown for 18 months on the breeder blocks and fattened for 18 months at Goorganga. Females are directed towards the most profitable markets at the time e.g. local butchers, local trade, US market, other export and so forth.

My brother, Ralph, manages the Collinsville and Proserpine blocks and I manage the Sarina block and the business bookwork (which is fast becoming a job in itself). After completing my schooling, I obtained an accountancy degree, worked for an accounting firm for 4 years, the Tax Office for 9 years, and back on the land for the past 4 years. I was raised on the land and instead of choosing an apprenticeship in mechanics or boilermaking, I chose bookkeeping.

#### The role of pastures in our operation

Improving pastures on our properties has always been a high priority. This practice has resulted, I believe, in improved viability through ever increasingly difficult times. Betterment of pastures on the breeder blocks leads to benefits in the following areas:

- assists cows in maintaining condition, which is important in their return to oestrus, and leads to higher calving percentages — or at least maintains calving rates in poorer seasons;

- provides cows with protein to increase milk supplies, which in turn improves the growth of the calf;
- maintains growth of weaners, which is vital for early turn off;
- allows greater carrying capacity without affecting the land; and
- provides better hay when cut for use in weaning.

I give these examples from first-hand experiences. The cattle I have in improved pasture blocks show the above benefits over those in unimproved blocks. This is exactly the reason I persist on a program of continual pasture improvement.

On the fattening block, improved pastures are essential in finishing cattle to the required standard. They also assist in fattening cattle all-year-round, which is important from a marketing aspect. Native grasses tend to assist only when seasons are favourable.

### Tests to select a pasture grass

To correctly assess the benefits of any pasture seed on the market, I firmly believe you must test that grass under your own conditions. Everyone has slightly different types of soil, climatic conditions, types of cattle, stocking rates and so on. Having said that, tests which I apply when deciding whether to persevere with a particular species include:

- *Cost.* Some species are still very expensive, although I would prefer an expensive grass that has the right qualities over a cheap alternative that cattle do not eat.
- *Palatability.* Will stock actually prefer the introduced grass?
- *Suitability.* How suitable is the grass to our soil type?
- *Sustainability.* Will the grass survive under certain stocking rates; does it have to be spelled?
- *Climatic.* How does it handle flooding, droughts, frosts?
- *Benefits to stock.* Does it actually provide a benefit to stock, particularly in comparison with native grass and other improved grasses?
- *Competition.* Can it compete with other existing grasses; does it tend to die out; will it spread itself; is it too competitive so will completely dominate?

- *Availability.* Is it readily available?
- *Susceptibility to diseases and pests.* Is it susceptible to attack by pests and diseases?
- *Preparation of seed bed required.* What form of land preparation is required before planting?

These tests apply equally to legumes as well as grasses. I think it is also important to provide some variety of feed to cattle — if you ever watch a beast grazing, you will see it selects a variety of vegetation when given a choice. Seldom do I ever sow one variety on its own.

### Future direction of pastures

I feel it important that research continue into pasture development for a number of reasons:

- to unearth further improvements e.g. increased weight gains from an improved variety, greater tolerance to droughts and frosts and other improvements over current grass species;
- to provide alternatives in case of diseases-pests affecting current varieties; and
- to develop varieties which, in the long term, become cheaper through greater seed production, being easier to harvest etc.

### Other factors affecting pasture decisions

Given a choice, I think nearly every grazier would prefer to have his whole property under improved pasture to gain benefits outlined previously. So, why doesn't everyone have all improved pastures? Some of my thoughts are:

- *Cost.* Obviously cost is the major limiting factor, especially in current times where we receive the same for our product as we did 10–15 years ago, whereas costs are rising all the time. When profits are scarce, expenditure on seeds and fertiliser is generally the first to be trimmed. This is important from a research point of view — even though you have a good product, unless it is essential, in tough times demand will be low. Costs include not only seed, but also machinery, fuel and wages used in preparing a seed bed.
- *Time.* Given current trends where farmers employ a minimum of staff and the owner's

time is taken up more and more by bookwork, meetings with banks, government departments, etc. in addition to normal property operations, there just isn't the time.

- *Government interference.* Government regulations, such as limiting clearing, will reduce the area available for pasture.
- *Availability.* Soil and climatic conditions are such that there may not be a suitable pasture variety available.

I make a practice of still planting smaller areas in tight times, to minimise the impact of cost and time, but continuing to improve my country.

### *Supplementary feeding*

Along with pasture improvement, supplementary feeding is an important aspect of modern farming. There have been important lessons learnt in recent dry seasons, which will no doubt flow over to form part of future practices when seasons improve.

Feeding is used in my estimation in 3 main forms — survival during drought, assisting cattle to grow (or pick up) and finishing stock for slaughter. Like all farm practices today, feeding is subject to rigid cost-benefit analysis — is there an end benefit over and above the cost? Whereas expenditure on pastures has an enduring benefit for a number of years and is relatively small when averaged on a cost per head basis, funds put into feed have a once-only effect and can be very expensive.

In our operation, we feed only for survival and growth. Fat cattle are finished on grass apart from the odd mob which is sent to feedlots. Breeders are fed molasses fortified with urea (M8U) during drought times, whereas weaners are fed a protein and molasses mix during the initial part of their weaning. The duration and quantities used depend upon the seasons, although I do feed weaners regardless of the season. Because I have controlled mating of breeders, all my weaning is done during winter months, when protein levels in the grass are at a minimum. Some assistance is necessary when weaners are first turned out of the yards following weaning.

### *Benefits from feeding and use of molasses*

I see a number of benefits from supplementary feeding:

- keeps cattle alive and keeps weaners growing;
- improves milk production for cows and maintains calving rates;
- helps quieten cattle — they get used to people and vehicles;
- allows maximum use of a paddock by shifting feed troughs to previously unused pasture; and
- once you have the necessary equipment, molasses is easy to handle in large volumes and is relatively cheap.

### *Disadvantages*

However, there are some disadvantages to be considered:

- *cost vs benefits.* Drought feeding can end up costing more than the cattle are worth;
- *regularity of supply of feed.* When crushing finishes, molasses runs short. In dry years, bigger operators tend to buy up most of the protein meals; and
- *effect on our properties.* Advances made in feeding tend to encourage us to run more cattle than we should, as we know they will survive. This ultimately leads to a decline in our pastures.

### *Future developments*

Many graziers like myself have been forced in recent times into feeding by necessity — feed or the cattle die. What is required is more research and publication of data on such things as:

- *dollar values on the benefits of feeding.* Apart from survival feeding, are there benefits to be gained from feeding at other times, how much benefit?;
- *impact of the length of feeding.* What are the end differences if you start feeding at an earlier time?;
- *alternative types of feeding mixtures, their costs and their benefits;*
- *the role of silage in feeding.* Costs involved; storage requirements; is it easy to make; can it be used to substitute for (or complement) some forms of feed?; and

- *Government storage areas of molasses.* Is this possible to make the product cheaper and give more certainty to supply?

Some of these data may be available in different forms. However, what is needed is an information booklet dedicated solely to the role of supplementary feeding. Once farmers are fully aware of the options available and the benefits to be derived, they can make an individual decision based on their own economic reality. This will benefit the whole industry.

### *Summary*

Grazing in the nineties requires an awful lot of planning, budgeting, experimenting, evaluating and careful costing to prove a success. No longer is it good enough to simply sit back and wait for things to happen. You have to: plan for adverse climatic conditions; produce a product the market now demands; be able to cope with sustained poor prices; and be aware of society's changing expectations. Pasture improvements and feeding schedules should form an important part of that plan for success.