

Pastures for prosperity — Beef inland forum.

2. The future for beef in the northern brigalow area

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Introduction

There are great opportunities for the northern brigalow area in the future for the production of quality beef.

When we look at the future, firstly, we must set our goals! Secondly, we must identify problems and limitations in achieving these goals! Thirdly, we must find solutions to those problems.

The challenge is to produce a consistent, reliable and desirable product, that meets market requirements, and to do this economically. The future wellbeing of our land must also be considered.

I do not believe our present grazing system can produce the quality and consistency that will satisfy an increasingly demanding market place.

The seasons, grass growth and quality vary considerably; therefore, cattle performance also is extremely variable.

Lot feeders would have us believe we should simply produce feeder steers to meet their demands.

The big advantage feedlots have is the production of a consistent, reliable product. It is also a very expensive way of achieving this aim.

There is no question that we must produce a consistent, reliable and desirable product!

Without a doubt, the northern brigalow area has the ability to produce the required product with some modifications to our present methods, at considerably less cost than full feedlotting. It is accepted that short-fed Jap ox and the best grass-fed Jap ox fill the same market.

Any system of production must be flexible enough to take advantage of changing marketing opportunities.

Our system

In an effort to meet the above goals, the following is an outline of the system we are developing.

Maximum use is made of grass — it is our most economical feed source.

Weaners are weaned in the yards and fed green chop or silage. They are then turned out onto pasture, or crop if available.

When weight gains on pasture drop to 0.5 kg/d, we start supplementing.

The ration used last year — the first trial of this system — was 93% silage (Graze and Grain) — 2% meat meal — 5% molasses — 2% mineral/rumen modifier mix. At 5 kg/hd/d, weight gains were 0.5–0.6 kg/d. At 9 kg/hd/d, weight gain was 1–1.1 kg/d. Paddock feed was very dry, short buffel.

We feed at the same time every day in the early morning and weaners learn the routine, and do not come looking for feed at other times.

When the season breaks, they go back on pasture.

The following season, when weight gain again drops to 0.5 kg/d, they are again fed. The markets determine what form this feeding takes. If the premium for grain-fed is sufficient, the steer and crossbred heifers are fed for the Jap ox market. The lighter cull heifers go to Korea, if the market is there.

The ration fed last year was 77% silage — 16% grain — 5% molasses — 2% mineral mix. Weight gains were 1.6–1.8 kg/hd/d.

If the "super grass" market develops and a reasonable premium is paid, this would be my preferred option — feeding just sufficient to meet this market.

We have looked at leucaena and ponded pastures to help fill feed gaps and extend the availability of quality feed. El Nino dictated that further backup was needed and we opted for silage.

As we saw it, once we had silage in place and other things like leucaena and ponded pasture to plug the gap, the only difference between a good year and bad year would be how much feed you had to feed out. Your turnoff (both numbers and quality) and your herd composition remain the same.

Pasture improvement

One of the great needs of brigalow country is for a reliable legume. A lot of country is now being blade ploughed, and we hope we may soon have a legume to plant in this operation.

Seca stylo has shown its worth in forest-type country in the northern brigalow. Alternatives are required to avoid the risks of reliance on a single species.

In developing new legumes or pastures, we should be aiming not only for improved feed quality and nitrogen-fixing ability but also for the ability to "stand over" and provide quality feed

over a longer period and lessen our quality feed gaps.

Leucaena may have a place in this regard as may other browse-type plants. We need to know more about establishment methods, suitable soils and management needed.

When feeding cattle, you become aware that small deficiencies can markedly affect performance. There is great scope to improve the utilisation of pastures by identifying these limiting factors and correcting them. With controlled waters the use of metering devices to add required minerals, proteins, etc. has great potential.

Retirement

Government could look at allowing retiring farmers, graziers and self-employed to convert capital gains made on the sale of the property or business to superannuation, with the returns being treated as such and not as capital gains for taxation purposes.

Consideration could also be given to allowing income equalisation deposits held at the time of retirement to be treated similarly.