

94/WA02



Producer Research Support

Special field days provide answers for Western Australia's outback beef producers

Shorthorn Society-WA Pastoral Group



The project

The Shorthorn Society of Australia's WA Pastoral Group set about to improve beef production in pastoral areas, through greater understanding of selection, breeding and marketing in this Producer Research Support project. Three special two-day field days were held.

Beef producers in the pastoral zone of WA believe location and environment places them at a disadvantage in relation to their southern counterparts, particularly in keeping abreast of advances in beef cattle technology, breeding and marketing.

To overcome this disadvantage the group organised three successful field days and initiated an ongoing demonstration to develop and evaluate a management program for the acclimatisation of yearling bulls.

One hundred and seventy beef producers attended and participated in these days.

Objectives

1. Increase awareness of the beef producers in the pastoral areas of WA in improved breeding and selection techniques so as to maximise marketing opportunities;
2. Develop and evaluate a management program for the acclimatisation of yearling bulls; and
3. Provide even lines of pastoral bred steers for finishing in the southern agricultural areas.

What was done

Two field days were held at Hamersley Station, Tom Price; one at Rob and Di Nottle's feedyard at Three Springs.

Seventy-five beef producers attended the first two-day Hamersley Station field day.

On the first day producers listened to speakers discuss and demonstrate new technology such as solar powered water pumps, power plants and electric fences.

Advances in nutrition were explained and modern cattle handling facilities were inspected.

Discussions were held on cattle breeding and herd management, including early weaning and herd health.

The second day consisted of discussions and demonstrations at the cattle yards, using appropriate cattle, on topics such as:

- selection of structurally sound and fertile herd improving bulls;
- setting of breeding objectives and goals;

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Key points

- After attending the first field day at Hamersley Station and also the field day at the feedlot, pastoral zone beef producers had a clearer idea of the specification of the southern agricultural markets and the northern and southern live export markets.
- Stock agents reported that 25% more of the cattle presented to them for inspection met market specifications.
- Because more cattle met specification, producer returns increased while costs were lower.
- Station managers were prepared to trial the purchase of a percentage of their replacement bulls as yearlings.
- Two company-owned stations said they would only buy bulls with BREEDPLAN and performance figures as a direct result of the project.

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Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

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- results of the M112 feedlot trial results and their implications;
- assessment of feeder steers as to their suitability for the domestic and export feedlot industry;
- assessment of females and their management;
- assessment and discussion of the yearling bulls introduced to Hamersley Station — lengthy discussions were held on the introduction of bulls from agricultural areas, the need to introduce improved genetics and the ways to overcome acclimatisation problems;
- plans were drawn up for the selection and management of yearling bulls; and
- producers present requested a follow up two-day field day — topics for the field day were discussed.

The second field day was held at Rob and Di Nottle's feedlot at Three Springs.

The main reason for this day was to inspect and discuss a group of trial steers on feed for 120 days.

This trial consisted of steers across three breeds — Angus, Murray Grey and Shorthorns. The Shorthorn steers were from both the pastoral and agricultural areas.

Producers were able to see first-hand the scanning of steers, using the real-time ultrasonic technology to measure fat and muscle.

A number of beef producers attended both field days and the flow and interchange of ideas between producers were excellent.

Sixty-five beef producers attended the third and final field day at Hamersley Station.

The first day began with a meeting of the Ashburton Landcare Development Committee.

This meeting gave the group a chance to discuss improved pastures, species suitable to the area, collating of trial results of mineral supplementation in pastoral areas of Northern Australia which, if implemented, should improve the fertility of breeding stock and growth rates in young breeding and sale stock.

Bull selection for the pastoral areas was discussed, assisted by a demonstration of serving capacity testing.

At the conclusion of the demonstration bulls that were selected as yearlings were assessed and evaluated by the group, in relation to their acclimatisation, serving capacity, BREEDPLAN figures, maturity pattern, structure and muscularity.



MLA also recommends

BeefPlan

BeefPlan is a non-traditional approach to learning. Groups of like-minded beef producers, work together as a management team to focus on property management. Importantly the learning agenda is set and controlled by the group.

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EDGEnetwork

EDGEnetwork offers practical field-based workshops to improve productivity and profitability for the long-term.

Workshops cover breeding, nutrition, grazing management, marketing and selling.

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Topics for the second day included:

- BREEDPLAN, a basic introduction and how to utilise BREEDPLAN when selecting bulls;
- factors affecting carcass quality;
- new markets opening up in the export area for the WA processors — carcass specifications needed to fill these markets;
- breeding for the live export markets;
- selection of steers suitable for the various export markets — from pure British breeds to at least 50% *Bos indicus*; and
- practical steps to setting up well thought out breeding programs, both pure and crossbreeding, to breed cattle for both the southern and northern markets.

The field day concluded with a practical workshop where producers attending were given the opportunity to put into practice the information they had received during the field days, in an exercise of selecting and culling of yearling station bred bulls.

All present eagerly participated in this exercise.

Discussion

Aim 1: To increase awareness of the beef producers in the pastoral areas of Western Australia in improved breeding and selection techniques so as to maximise marketing opportunities.

- 60% of the group said that they now, as a result of the first field day, bought herd bulls that had been checked for breeding soundness.
- Of the 60%, 20% sought replacement herd bulls that also had above average BREEDPLAN figures for the breed.
- 80% of producers present indicated that they would select replacement bulls more carefully, so that they would enhance their breeding program rather than buying to a price. The remainder indicated that they were happy they were purchasing the right bulls, two were still going to buy on price.

When asked why they wanted breeding soundness checked bulls they said they expected these bulls to serve more cows and last longer, reducing cost per calf. They would need fewer bulls and, therefore, could afford to pay more for sounder bulls.

Producers seeking bulls with BREEDPLAN figures said they now realised that by selecting the bulls with balanced figures to suit their cow herd and environments they would have more cattle meeting market specifications and increase their income.

- About 70% said they had, after attending two of the three field days, gained knowledge and confidence to help them make better informed decisions when culling unproductive bulls and females. The same producers felt they could now select and better manage their replacement heifers to retain the most productive and cull the least productive in a practical and economical manner.
- 20% of producers felt the knowledge gained would help fine tune their breeding programs.
- 10% said they would need more intensive tuition and requested help with their breeding programs and marketing to increase returns.



Aim 2: To develop and evaluate a management program for the acclimatisation of yearling bulls.

A management program was established and yearling bulls were purchased for Hamersley Station. These bulls had been checked for breeding soundness and were selected from herds with GROUP BREEDPLAN figures.

The first year of this program was in a severe drought. The bulls were mated to yearling heifers for a restricted period. They worked well but because of the drought did not grow as well as most producers would have expected.

The bulls were sound and had the genetics for growth but because of the drought did not grow but have acclimatised and are working well.

As a result of the demonstration two station managers were prepared to trial the purchase of a percentage of their replacement bulls as yearlings.

The general consensus was that the success of this demonstration will not be known for several seasons. The group will be advised of the progress of the yearling bulls, compared to older bulls bought at the same time.

Aim 3: To provide even lines of pastoral bred steers for finishing in the southern agricultural areas (also live export).

Feedback from producers and agents as to the success of this aim was very positive.

Bob Gahan, Shorthorn Society breed development officer, said that after attending the first field day at Hamersley Station and also the field day at the feedlot, pastoral zone beef producers had a clearer idea of the specification of the southern agricultural markets and the northern and southern live export markets.

He said stock agents reported that 25% more of the cattle presented to them for inspection met market specifications.

Because more cattle met specification, producer returns increased while agents costs were lower. He said the managers of two company-owned stations said they would only buy bulls with BREEDPLAN and performance figures as a direct result of the field days.

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