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## Producer Research Support

### Fertiliser strategies improve cattle marketability

Singleton Hook and Hoof Association



#### The project

Returns of up to 200% from pasture improvement programs that feature the use of fertiliser were achieved in this Producer Research Support project.

#### Objectives

1. Determine the most economical fertiliser strategies that enable beef producers to meet their specific market aims;
2. Monitor the cost of pasture improvement and the cattle performance on these pastures to determine the cost effectiveness of pasture improvement in the Hunter Valley;
3. Improve the marketability of beef produced by using improved pastures to enable specific markets to be targeted;
4. Demonstrate to Hunter Valley beef producers the benefit of targeting specific markets and to grow the pastures to enable those targets to be reached; and
5. Investigate the sustainability of fertiliser use and alternatives to inorganic fertilisers.

#### What happened?

Weaners in one fertilised paddock were 46 kg heavier and cows 98 kg heavier than similar cattle grazing unfertilised pasture, despite a heavier stocking rate in the fertilised paddock.

Cow fertility problems on this property were not associated with phosphorus (P), calcium (Ca), selenium (S) or copper (Cu) deficiencies but from low seasonal feed quality and quantity.

Greg Ball, Grenell, Bowmans Creek, estimated a 200% return on the cost of pasture improvement in the first year.

Estimating pasture establishment costs at \$185 a hectare or \$3,000 for 16 hectares, he made an extra \$6,400 from the paddock.

"This was achieved by high stock turnover from the paddock and the ability to turn off animals to meet market specifications and achieve a premium."

"We were able to make a dollar out of it in a very dry year. If we can do that in a drought, it can only get better," he said.

On the nearby property Richard and Cliff Marshall, Bowmans Creek, selected two paddocks - one was unfertilised, the other received 250 kg single superphosphate with 0.02% molybdenum.

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#### Key points

- Beef producers can use pasture improvement strategies to meet specific production requirements and achieve increased returns and sustainability.
- Several fertiliser and pasture strategies can be used in the Hunter Valley to improve cattle marketability, increase turnover and cash flow, despite poor seasonal conditions and deteriorating cattle prices.
- By meeting market specs, higher returns cover pasture improvement costs.
- Pasture improvement maintained stock turnover and cash flow, even in difficult economic and seasonal conditions.
- Producers were motivated to change their management.
- Increased cash flow and the possibility of large returns in reasonable to good seasons increased the sowings of improved pastures in the district.
- Greater personal satisfaction was gained by being able to meet market requirements and receive a premium for the effort.

#### Contact details

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The fertilised paddock maintained a higher carrying capacity of between 25 and 35% with cattle 10–15% heavier even with the higher stocking rate.

Project chair Jenny Cole, Warkworth Pastoral Co, Singleton, said that by comparing fertilised paddocks with unfertilised paddocks they found that not only were stock in better condition on the fertilised paddocks but stock turnover was quicker and cows returned to service faster.

"This means a steady income flow," she said.

Soil testing had also helped ensure more efficient use of fertiliser and better results.

Graham Yates, manager of Greylands, Singleton, said one of the best features of the pastures he had sown was the turnover achieved.

"This allowed us, even in a poor season, to finish steers to get the best return possible, rather than being stuck with them as the season deteriorated, or selling at low store prices.

"We avoided a stock build up on the farm by finishing the steers quickly on the improved pasture, allowing us to look after our breeders better. It has only been the poor seasons that prevented a much higher return than the one we got."

## Discussion

The trials proved that several fertiliser and pasture strategies could be used in the Hunter Valley to improve cattle marketability, increase turnover and cash flow. This was despite poor seasonal conditions and deteriorating cattle prices at the time.

According to project facilitator, Neil Nelson, the fertiliser helped producers achieve target market specifications and higher returns which "well and truly" covered pasture improvement costs.

"The project demonstrated that a pasture improvement program is still valuable in difficult circumstances and maintains stock turnover and cash flow," Mr Nelson said.

He said the two-year project had provided motivation for beef producers to change their management; increase cash flow to maintain their business; and offered the possibility of larger returns in reasonable to good seasons.

## 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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The improved pasture allowed cattle to meet the carcase standards demanded by the nearby AMH Aberdeen abattoir, resulting in a premium for the cattle and increasing cattle throughput. The result of the project had been increased sowings of improved pastures in the district.

Mr Nelson said the trials had shown that pasture improvement costs could be recovered in the first year, despite deteriorating cattle prices.

The trial also underscored the poor performance of cattle on unfertilised pasture compared with fertilised pasture.

## **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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