

Brain power: turning past

Beef

- ◆ Steve and Sue Brain, Boona, Mumbannar
- ◆ Run 1100 Angus cows
- ◆ Produce feeder steers for long-fed Jap B3 market



By SALLY WHITE

GLOSSY Angus steers mingle contentedly around the gate, unperturbed by the entry of a stranger into their paddock.

These half-tonne blocks of beef – days off departure for the feedlot – are testament to a highly efficient pasture-based production system.

For Steve and Sue Brain, it's a constantly evolving system designed to convert moisture into feed and feed into beef.

Their 950-hectare property Boona at Mumbannar in the far south-west reaches of Victoria is geared primarily toward producing feeder steers for the long-fed B3 market.

They aim to turn off 500 steers at about 500 kilograms in a cost effective manner, balancing input costs with efficient production and pasture utilisation.

Most are sold to the Rangers Valley feedlot near Glen Innes in northern NSW where the Brains are ranked among the top five per cent of volume suppliers. Additional steers are sold into the Certified Australian Angus Beef (CAAB) program.

They're currently producing about 430kg per hectare of beef – back from a peak of 570kg/ha in better seasons but still in the top 20pc of the South West Victorian Farm Monitor benchmarking group.

• The pasture

It's a job done nearly entirely off pasture – production of which has been boosted by the purchase of two centre pivots in the past seven years.

Each waters about 80ha of high performance pasture – principally Italian ryegrass, fescue and clovers – used strategically during the year and producing about 18 tonnes of dry matter a hectare.

"For us the pivots haven't just been a way to increase our kilograms of beef produced per hectare," Mr Brain said.

"We see them more as an adjunct

to our dryland pastures that's helped us stabilise our breeding herd numbers and set us up to be able to wean early and grow them on without supplementary feeding of pellets or silage and meeting contract specs on steers early."

Silage used to be a significant source of feed for the operation but one they've now moved away from, principally due to the labour involved in making and feeding it out.

"Growing grass under pivots is a whole lot easier and more cost-effective than conserving silage," Mr Brain said.

The country under pivots receives only one additional fertiliser application than their dryland pasture – an extra 30-40 units/ha of potassium over and above their standard fertiliser regime which this year was reduced to 15kg of P and 20kg of K in the spring.

Mr Brain sees it as the perfect starting ground for the weaners, providing better protein and energy levels than the dryland where feed quality declines through summer. Principally heath flats and

stringybark rises, the farm's soils are naturally sandy and quite acidic and it's taken considerable investment by the Brains on phosphorus and lime to build fertility up to today's levels.

Their approach has been based around Albrecht soil tests and Albrecht principles of the need to

ing 40ha of the farm which leased out to potato growers year and then sown down to permanent pasture in May.

Mr Brain said they had to away from perennial ryegrass more deep-rooted species such as phalaris, cocksfoot, chicory and clovers in a bid to make the

“For us (production gains) are going to come down to better yields, better utilisation better persistence and how well we build up the water holding capacity in our soil.”

– STEVE BRAIN,
Boona, Mumbannar

achieve “soil mineral balance” for optimum pasture growth.

They put out maintenance applications of lime at about 1t/ha every six years and spread about 2t/ha on individual paddocks depending on soil tests as they go through the pasture renovation process.

They renovate about 60ha of pasture a year on average includ-

available moisture in the prod-

“When we get those big p of heavy rain we want it all utilised where it falls – for soak into the profile and for tures to access it when a rather than running off into or dams.

“Phalaris has worked real in that respect – they're

