

Focus

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Change-up: Mike Carroll surveys his Derrinallum farm that he has converted to a low-labour venture. Pictures: ANDY ROGERS



WEEKLY TIMES
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2013 FARMER OF THE YEAR

Mike Carroll is a contender for *The Weekly Times* Coles 2013 Farmer of the Year. Farmers who appear in *The Weekly Times*, weeklytimesnow.com.au and *Farm* are eligible to win one of six categories and, ultimately, be crowned our Farmer of the Year.

Category winners will win \$3000 in prizes, with the 2013 Farmer of the Year receiving \$10,000 cash. To nominate a farmer, and more details, visit weeklytimesnow.com.au

Beef you can truly bank on



Mike Carroll is equally at home both on the farm and in the boardroom, writes JAMES WAGSTAFF

WHOEVER coined the phrase "you can't have your cake and eat it too" never met Mike Carroll.

In the lush green paddocks of Victoria's Western District, the Melbourne-based corporate heavy is enjoying the returns from his most passionate investment to date: Farming.

Mike — who is chairman of Queensland Sugar and sits on a number of agri-industry boards including Warrnambool Cheese and Butter, Rural Finance and the Gardiner Foundation — bought 265ha at Derrinallum six years ago.

He had recently stepped down as NAB Agribusiness general manager and quickly set about transforming it into a low labour-input operation.

More simply, a farm he could run four days a fortnight with minimal outside help.

Mike is no stranger to getting his hands dirty — his family has farmed at Mudgegonga, in Victoria's North East, since the 1860s.

After school, he studied agriculture science at LaTrobe University before embarking on an agribusiness career that included stints with global chemicals giant Monsanto and a private venture-capital biotechnology firm.

But he is perhaps best known for his almost 20-year career with NAB, culminating in his appointment as agribusiness general manager.

"I always had a yearning to get back involved with farming. All through those years with a fairly heavy executive commitment at NAB I maintained a lot of interest and involvement in the family farm," Mike said.

"When I left NAB the opportunity came up for me to buy my own place and do things my own way."

Mike said he initially looked for land in the North East that could be run in conjunction with the family farm but found the region "pretty expensive" relative to its stocking capacity.

Vast tracts of land had been subdivided into 40ha lots "and that's what has blown the cost out".

"The appealing thing about the Western District is its affordability on dollars per dry sheep equivalent basis," Mike said.

When Mike bought the property it was "in a pretty poor state of repair". Soil phosphorus levels were low and the fences "dilapidated".

Continued Page 30



CELEBRATING AUSSIE FARMERS

Through their partnership with Coles, Warrnambool Cheese & Butter will source an additional 30 million litres of milk from south-west Victorian dairy farmers each year.



Mike raises steaks with



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He soon turned around the health of the soil and divided the property into 26 paddocks, which are now home to 200 Angus breeding cows on "a pretty simple four-paddock rotation program" where only one in four paddocks is used at any one time.

"I've set up the place so it is easier to keep an eye on. There's one central laneway and every water point is just off the laneway so from the motorbike you can see whether the troughs have got water and there's no leaks," Mike said.

"It's a pretty simple process to whiz down the lane and back to make sure everything's OK."

Neighbours Chris and Sharon McLeod look after things when Mike's absent.

The farm receives an average 650mm of rain, which Mike said was "highly variable but probably more consistent than it is in the North East".

It boasts a mix of soils — "from heavy, black self-mulching clays through to a little bit of lunette bank with a sandy loam — which is particularly good — as well as the normal Western District clay loam".

The herd is a member of the Team Te Mania program — a benchmarking progeny-test system that involves 40 herds across Victoria, NSW and South Australia.

Under the program, bulls are leased from the Te Mania Angus stud at Mortlake for three years and members can access semen from leading Te Mania sires at reduced rates.

He described the team members — which aim to produce stock for the lucrative Japanese market — as "thinking" farmers.

Mike admits being a big fan of objective measurement — he covered the topic in his university thesis — and said he was attracted to Te Mania for its high-accuracy estimated breeding values.

In particular he pays close attention to figures for calving ease, mature cow weight, fat, days to calving, scrotal size, marbling and muscling.

Bulls are joined to cows for nine weeks from November 1 each year, resulting in a mid-August to September calving.

Mike said the timing was de-

At a glance



Who: Mike Carroll

What: Beef

Where: Derrinalum

Why: The right mix

termined with the help of the McKinnon Project's Lisa Warn, based on the CSIRO GrassGrow program and refined with the help of Meat and Livestock Australia's feed demand calculator.

"What I was aiming to achieve was the maximum utilisation of the grass," Mike said.

"By joining then, calving at that time, keeping the steers through the second spring allows me to get the highest feed utilisation I can."

Stocking rates range from 13 dry sheep equivalents per hectare in autumn "when things get tight" to more than 20 DSE/ha during spring.

Mike wants to reduce joining to six weeks but "you always have this overhanging concern that a bull hasn't been performing properly".

"If I look at some of my production data, I need to lift the kilograms of beef I'm producing per hectare. And the best way to do that is with a tighter calving program. I just need to work out a way to take some of that risk out of a bull not performing."

All the heifers are artificially inseminated, "which brings most of your heifer calving forward to very early in the calving period".

They are joined at 15 months of age, weighing about 400kg, to calve at two years. Bulls used in the AI program are the "next generation of Te Mania genetics" and can be aged as young as 15 months.

"Given the heifer's lower milk (production), it gives their calves more chance to catch up with the calves out of the older cows," Mike said.

He said there were two rounds of AI, with about a 60 per cent strike rate in the first

fixed-time insemination that meant most calved over 10 days.

"So there's a 10-day period where I need to try and be at the farm. And then three weeks later you get another calving block with another 30 per cent (of heifers). It does make calving supervision a bit easier."

Cows are joined to Te Mania-leased sires. One bull is used over 60 cows.

"I do push them a bit (in terms of bull-to-female ratio)," Mike said.

With a plan to improve the accuracy of breeding values in his own herd, Mike said bulls were ideally returned Team Te Mania lease sires "that have done a couple of seasons on one of the other progeny-test herds and are stacking up pretty well".

"That is my preference over younger bulls," he said.

"It also means I can use them over 60 cows whereas younger bulls I might only be able to put over 40 cows."

Depending on "what's coming through Te Mania and what's available" the bulls will be retained for two or three years.

All calves are tagged at birth. The heifer's calves are weighed while the cows' calves are given a size score.

"That's the period of the year when the workload is reasonably heavy and I try to be there for as much of that as I can. I enjoy it," Mike said.

The calves run with their mothers for six months until they are weaned in February.

To avoid supplementary feeding, the calves are weaned as soon as their mothers start to slip in condition.

"Then hopefully the cows have enough condition to carry them all the way through the autumn until their next calving without any supplementary feeding," Mike said.

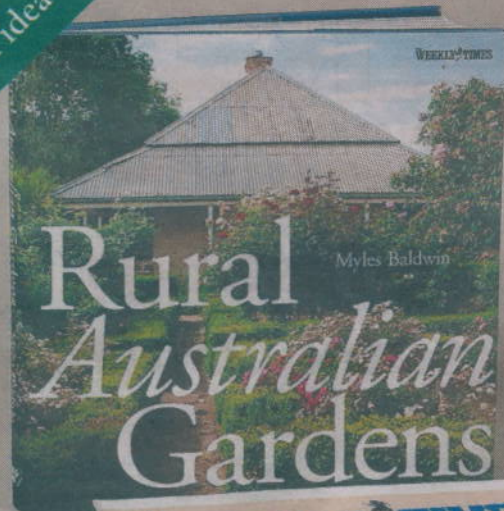
Mike said he preferred yard weaning, whereby the calves are drafted off their mothers and spend two weeks in the yards being fed hay or silage with increased human interaction.

They are then let out in a phalaris paddock "that can take a bit of bashing".

"They'll stay there on feeders until we get that autumn break and wedge of feed," Mike said.

"With this year's late break I

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beef you can bank on



Greener pastures: Mike Carroll (far left) rounds up cattle on his Angus beef farm at Derrinallum (left) and cows graze on the farm's now-lush pastures. Pictures: ANDY ROGERS

cut it a bit fine — the weaners were fed through until the early June and I used all of the hay purchased last spring.”

Mike said the calves weighed about 230kg when they came off the cows and “they don’t do too much more than hold their condition in that post-weaning period”.

“They might put on half a kilogram a day through until mid-winter and as we get to the end of winter they’ll start to pick up and through spring they’re putting on over 2kg a day,” he said.

Typically the weaners are all run in one mob of 180-200 while the cows run in two or three groups of about 60-80.

Steers go off to the 32,000-head Rangers Valley feedlot at Glen Innes in northern NSW at about 15 months of age when the tops weigh 530kg and the herd averages 470-480kg.

Here they are fed for 280 days.

“We’re not locked into (Rangers) so they have to pay a competitive price,” Mike said.

“Prices last year were off the year before but it was a good price compared to the market.”



Mike said the Japanese-owned Rangers Valley had traditionally focused on the Japanese long-fed market but was now also selling into the domestic and high-quality European Union markets.

Surplus breeding cows are sold at about five years old, “more often than not” as pregnancy tested in calf through the Team Te Mania AuctionsPlus online sale.

“There is still a lot of productive life in them — they are still a pretty valuable resource.”

Mike said the farm was located in a good ryegrass area.

“When I arrived, two thirds of the farm was Australian phalaris and one third was Vic rye, which had been put in 20 years ago and had persisted really well,” he said.

“I think rye is more productive than phalaris, certainly Australian phalaris.

“So I played around with some of the newer varieties of rye but there were real question marks about their persistence.

“I’m pretty impressed with the new varieties of phalaris — Holdfast and Holdfast GT along with Plantain and the newer sub clovers would probably be my

choice of pastures for renovation programs now.”

Mike renovates about 16ha of the farm’s pastures each year.

The bulk of the farm’s feed production occurs in spring, with growth generally kicking in mid-August and petering out in mid-November.

Mike said the paddock rotation program was “about making sure you graze your paddocks very evenly so the animals can’t selectively graze certain species in the pasture”.

“By having a large mob in a smallish paddock you graze everything off pretty evenly,” Mike said.

“And that tends to encourage more productive species and suppress the weeds.

“The rotation length depends on how quickly your pastures are growing.

“You want to get your grasses to three or four leaves so they’ve got good leaf area to photosynthesis and keep growing.”

In regards to soil fertility, Mike said the paddocks were now 17-18 Olsen P — “which is around the level you want to optimise production” — up

from 10-12 when he purchased the farm.

Mike’s animal-health program also had input from the McKinnon Project.

Calves are vaccinated with five-in-one and treated for worms at weaning, again when they come off the feeders and again in spring.

Cows receive nothing but an annual five-in-one booster while the two-year-old heifers are drenched soon after calving.

The herd is EU and Meat Standards Australia accredited and plans to become accredited under the Cattle Council of Australia’s new Grassfed program.

Mike said the farm’s biggest costs were fertiliser and feed.

“I buy in feed for the weaners every year — hay or silage depending on what is the best value at harvest,” he said.

“Depending on what is the best value at harvest” it was purchased “straight off the harvester”.

“It is when prices are the most economical,” Mike said.

“If you can put your order in with someone before they actually put their equipment into the paddock — so they know

they’ve got a committed sale — that’s when you’ll get the best price.”

Mike said according to the Farm Monitor program, he was achieving a premium price for his product and his costs were low.

“But my production per hectare is lower than southwest (Victorian) spring calvers so I need to focus on getting kilograms of production per hectare up,” he said.

“And to me the obvious starting point on working on that is getting the average weight of the steers up.”

To achieve this Mike will focus on the “tail-end steers” who “invariably are the late calves, and that’s why I need to get from a nine-week joining back to a six-week joining”.

Mike said Breedplan was a valuable resource that had the potential to help commercial producers deliver a better article to their customers.

“I’d like to see Breedplan to evolve to a point where we can produce a report on our steer production that shows the value of those steers to a potential backgrounder, processor or feedlotter,” he said.

Putting on his agribusiness hat, Mike — a former Meat and Livestock Australia and Australian Farm Institute director — said the future of farming was bright.

“We’ve been living on the promise that the world population is growing, the Asian economies are becoming more affluent and they are going to be seeking out higher-quality produce. I think the prospects of this happening are pretty bright,” he said.

“Some bullish outlooks on food demand are probably overstated so I don’t think there will be a magic pot of gold.

“We are always, in a market economy, going to come under pressure.

“There is a lot of latent productivity and nothing softens high prices like high prices.”