



"The Brigalows" Angus cows and calves.

AMY LAWSON

FOR three- and-a-half years, Michael O'Brien has been feeding for three, using every method in the book to maintain a productive body weight in his 1100-cow herd.

"The whole key when feeding is you're feeding three animals – the cow and calf on the ground, and the ability of the cow to get back in calf," said Mr O'Brien, who farms the 20,640-hectare property "The Brigalows", Carinda via Walgett, with his wife, Annie.

Long after many had sold down their breeding herds, the 2009 NSW Farmer of the Year has preserved his renowned Te Mania-blood Angus cow herd through a mix of agistment, travelling stock routes, and drought feeding – and he hasn't regretted the decision.

"I've tried at tremendous monetary cost to keep the body weight of the cows in a fertile state," he said. "Once you let the cow get too light you lose production – she doesn't get back in calf and it brings the whole production system to a screaming halt."

"The body weight of the cow is the engine room of the cattle industry."

The O'Briens made the switch from backgrounding and cattle trading to breeding in 2000.

The herd's doing-ability had been well and truly put to the test during the recent drought, and Mr O'Brien was pleased with its performance.

"The thing that impresses me about Angus cattle is that they're the right type of factory – the cow puts all her energy into her calf and keeping it growing," he said.

"The fertility and performance of the cows in relation to the growth of their calves is a main feature of the breed."

"We pregnancy test every year and even in these dry conditions and moving them about as we have, we're still getting more than 90 per cent of the cows in calf which is a tremendous result."

The use of renowned Angus bloodline Te Mania had helped drive solid cashflow into the business each year, together with the beef market's record rise.

"We've calved every year and sold the progeny each year to maintain normal production income, which has helped enormously to keep us viable with the tremendous cost of drought feeding," Mr O'Brien said.

"I sell nearly all of my progeny on AuctionsPlus and when they are offered for sale, they're in the leading 5pc of pricing at the time."

"The cattle sell themselves and we have repeat clients for both our steers and heifers." Among those clients is Rangers Valley feedlot at Glen Innes, which has for

25 years been buying Te Mania-blood cattle for their high-value growth and marbling traits.

Rangers Valley livestock manager, Richard Eldershaw, spoke in May before a group of Te Mania clients, including Mr O'Brien, which had included the feedlot in a tour of the New England.

Mr Eldershaw said the feedlot had for the past five years participated in Te Mania's performance measurement project through Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), where sire-identified commercial progeny were kept as part of a contemporary group at Rangers Valley, graded through Meat Standards Australia (MSA), and data fed back into Breedplan.

"There is one outstanding reason for doing this in that chiller measurements for marbling are highly accurate compared to ultrasound scanning, and are a far better indication of the marbling potential of the animal, so it gives far greater accuracy and therefore quicker identification of the superior bloodlines," Mr Eldershaw said.

While acknowledging that the Angus breed across Australia was "blessed with many progressive breeders", Mr Eldershaw said performance recording was key.

"It's absolutely vital for the breed to progress," he said. "Performance recording is essential and we're lucky to have commercial producers

prepared to identify their cattle and contribute with commercial data."

While on tour in May, the group of Te Mania clients also visited the University of New England (UNE) where they heard from animal genetics and breeding unit director, Rob Banks.

"Anything you want to improve in cattle can be done but you must have data, and with increased accuracy of data comes accelerated genetic progress," he said.

"The Te Mania stud and clients collect data from a wider range of traits than is usual in this country or in fact anywhere else in the world, which means they have more power and capacity to make more

improvements in more areas, and the genetic trend graphs show they're making improvements in pretty much all areas."

Dr Banks anticipated greater emphasis in the future on feed efficiency, cow longevity, immunity and health, and nutritional composition of meat.

"The challenge for the breeding sector is to try to assess what the market's going to be looking for five, 10 years out, in addition to what's already considered important."

"I think feed costs are likely to become more and more important, as will meat quality, and animal health, such as internal parasites, and respiratory disease in feedlots."

Feeding for three through tough drought at Walgett



Genetics and markets drive decision

THE decision to hold 1100 Angus breeding cows and feed them through the Walgett district's relentless drought was made with breed quality and predicted market upside in mind.

Ever the optimist, Michael O'Brien, "The Brigalows", Carinda via Walgett, has been "somewhat fortunate", being able to take advantage of back-to-back favourable autumn and winter weather conditions in neighbouring southern shires.

"We haven't had to go far to find good conditions on the travelling stock routes (TSRs), which has by far and away been the preferred option for feeding cattle, especially cows and calves," he said.

"We've fed them cotton seed for energy and protein and grape marc (residue out of the grapes at the processing winery) as a bulk material, we've had them on the road, trucked weaners as far south as Hamilton in western Victoria – we've used every trick in the book available to us to keep the herd going."

"Between the cattle and sheep breeding operations, I've spent a small fortune keeping breeding stock in full

production in the past three- and-a-half years, but the current strength in cattle and sheep markets has made the proposition an outstanding economic success."

Mr O'Brien, who runs 8000 Dohne breeding ewes in addition to the cows, said it would have been easy enough to sell his stock but hard to buy them back in and start over again.

"I was anticipating the increase in price of cattle that has eventuated and I wanted to retain the Te Mania genetics," he said.

"We've got a name for quality and want to continue it – we don't want to have a stop/start operation."

At present, he has 540 cows on agistment at his brother's Terry Hie Hie property.

The balance of his cows are now calving on 2500 hectares of Whitehaven Coal's Boggabri property, "Kurumbede", which Mr O'Brien secured through a 12-month lease in early June.

"Successfully tendering for the lease has been a tremendous weight off my shoulders," said Mr O'Brien, who is pictured with his cattle at the Boggabri lease property.

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— Richard Eldershaw, Rangers Valley

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