

Boona reaps profit from feeder steers

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THE steers in “Boona’s” herd not far from the South Australian border are grazing their way around a rotational grazing pie, blissfully unaware of any seasonal pressures of an El Nino.

Stephen and Sue Brain run a 1000-cow Angus breeding herd in a feeder steer business on 949 hectares at Mumbannar, Victoria, 35 kilometres east of Mt Gambier, South Australia.

The property, on predominantly sandy soils, lies 15km from the coast and relies on an average annual rainfall of 700 millimetres.

This cattle enterprise is a Team Te Mania, self-replacing, spring calving, EU-accredited operation, supplying steers to feedlots on contract each year.

“For productivity the feeder steer business is where the maximum efficiency lies,” Mr Brain said.

“It costs a lot more to fatten an animal than to grow one.”

Every three weeks from mid-October, a truckload of 13- to 15-month-old steers weighing 500 kilograms heads to Swifts at Narrandera, NSW, or Rangers Valley at Glen Innes, NSW.

“On October 14, 2015 a truckload of 72 steers had an average weight of 509kg,” Mr Brain said.

“To get them off at that age we have to try to keep them growing through winter.”

To achieve this, Mr Brain has the help of assistant manager Doug Smith, and operates a time-controlled grazing system to grow and use more feed.

In winter a mob of 500 steers rotate through 18 20-hectare paddocks of the pie shaped grazing system, moving every two days.

“We work with the time of year and the stage of leaf of the plant, moving the cattle when the plant reaches a 2.5 to three leaf stage,” he said.

“In winter there’s a longer grazing period of 40 to 42 days, whereas in spring it might be 20 to 21 days.

“The main goal is quick growth, to get them up and off as quickly as possible,” Mr Brain said.

“The longer we keep them the more it costs.”

From 2010/11 to 2014/15 a total grazing area of 900ha produced an average of 624kg/ha at \$1.24/kg before tax or interest.

This cost is up significantly on the 2001/02 to 2004/05 average production figure of 520kg/ha at 95 cents/kg/ha.

For Mr Brain productivity is about growing and harvesting the maximum amount of grass possible in the shortest possible time.

“We try and match the production curve with the animals we’re carrying,” he said.

“In winter that’s hardest when we carry only weaners and



Stephen Brain, “Boona”, Mumbannar, Victoria, with some of his weaners on the irrigated pastures.

pregnant females with a stocking rate of 17,000 or DSE of 19.

“In spring the stocking rate rises dramatically to 26,500 or a DSE of 29.”

The program at “Boona” is a fine-tuned exercise to achieve the quick growth and early turn-off goal.

Heifers are joined for seven weeks, cows for nine. Bulls are jump-tested or vet-checked before a multiple joining program that achieves conception rates of 85-90 per cent in the heifers and more than 90pc in the cows.

Heifer calving begins in late July and cows calve in August.

All steers are raised on perennial phalaris and ryegrass based pastures with sub-clover.

There has been an annual 50ha pasture renovation project.

“It’s important to manage pastures in a way that doesn’t damage them too much in dry seasons,” Mr Brain said.

“With summer rain we still get productivity here.”

Weaners aged about four to five months old are treated with an all-trace bolus capsule.

“Trials show the minerals and vitamins in the bolus help in our sandy soils, increasing conception rates in heifers and increasing growth rates in both heifers and steers,” Mr Brain said.

“Next year we’ll probably treat our pre-calving heifers as well.”

Yard weaning normally occurred in January when they were about 140 to 150kg but lack of rainfall this season meant it was likely to take place in late December, “putting the cows into sacrificed paddocks to supplementary feed with hay”

Irrigation system produces liquid gold at Mumbannar

STEPHEN Brain’s 160 hectares of irrigated pasture at “Boona” is delivering gold.

Four bores deliver good quality water to two pivot irrigations systems that automatically travel over the electric wires in the rotation cells.

“The boats on the pivot system push the wire down

for the pivot to go over,” he said.

“Instead of producing silage or supplementary feed on farm to feed to our weaners, we put them on irrigation.

“It’s like a big self-feeder that helps us to get the animals off earlier.”

The irrigation system is shaped like a pie with two large circles divided into eight cells of 10ha.

The weaners are moved through the 16 cells every two days.

“Cows get set-stocked for a couple of months during

calving before going into rotation,” he said.

“Calves become much quieter as they get used to being moved through gateways, handled by people and dogs, making a huge difference to the weaning process.”



“Boona” weaners at Mumbannar, Victoria.