

OPTIMISING FERTILITY AT THE MOLE

BY REBECCA SHARPE and STEPHEN BURNS, THE LAND August 2015

ON THE western edge of the Macquarie Marshes, Angus cattle have proved their performance record for Garry and Leanne Hall, “The Mole”, Warren.

Since the Hall family bought the property in the 1930s, various breeds of cattle have been run but, for the past 25 years, black has been the colour of choice at “The Mole”, established on Ardenside and Wallaroy genetics.

Depending on the water situation at Burrendong Dam, Mr Hall said he ran a herd of between 600 and 800 self-replacing Angus breeders on the 5250-hectare property.

With a focus on producing quick maturing calves, Mr Hall balanced moderate growth traits with fertility to fit the landscape of the property, located 114 kilometres north of Warren.

“We have a focus on gestation length and calving ease – we want to get the calves out early,” he said.

“I try to stay away from extreme growth traits because they’re the ones that won’t calve in tough times.”

Mr Hall said he was conscious of meat eating quality of the cattle he produced, overlapping that with high fertility.

Pregnancy testing had been common practice at “The Mole” since the early 1970s, and maintaining a high level of fertility in females had always been at the top of the breeding objectives list.

“We are aiming for females whose energy requirements are not too high,” Mr Hall said. “We want cows that, in a marginal environment and an average season, can still get back in calf as soon as possible.”

The Halls join their females in late September by fixed-time artificial insemination for a July calving and then back up with a natural joining from October.

Heifers are joined at the same time, at about 15 months-of-age, and run separately from weaning until they produce their first calf. Heifers that failed to produce a calf, or cows that did not conceive each year, were culled.

“We get reasonably good conception rates but still back up with a natural joining.”

Mr Hall said while optimising fertility was the main focus when culling, traits like conformation and feet were also considered.

Calves are weaned in February for a minimum of 10 days, at about six months old. “They start off in a small yard then they go out into a small run-out paddock and get locked up each night,”

he said. “The main part of that is the handling of them and exposing them to different things such as dogs, horses and children.”

During weaning, they are fed a combination of barley straw and locally grown cotton seed. “Cotton seed is easy to feed and they can’t get too much of it. “We’ve found barley straw softer on young cattle and doesn’t scratch around their mouths as much.”

Since 1990, the Halls have been targeting feedlots with the steer portion of the annual drop, selling them at about 420 kilograms live weight.

“We have a good relationship with our markets but we will sell to whoever offers the most money,” Mr Hall said.

Steers being prepared for the feedlot grazed on forage crops, which usually included about 200ha of barley or oats when the season allowed.

The heifer portion was assessed and either kept as future breeders or culled and sold through a number of avenues. One of these avenues was offloading to fellow Team Te Mania members.

As a part of Team Te Mania, the Halls could access both live bulls and semen from the Te Mania program, as well as expand marketing options for steers and females.

“We have a few options with the black heifers such as live export, restockers or anybody else in the Te Mania team,” he said.

Mr Hall had established a good relationship with previous restocker buyers of his heifers and occasionally contacted them to offload his stock. “We offer them to other Team Te Mania members first,” he said.

“While I do like to see them go to other breeders, they are a by-product of our business and we need to make sure we leave enough room on our property for the ones that have been classed in as our future breeders.”

Access to top genetics without spending up big

GARRY Hall can’t justify spending \$20,000 or more on bulls, so he leases them instead.

As part of Team Te Mania, Mr Hall is able to satisfy his sire needs without needing to spend big dollars to access top genetics.

Following the 2008-09 drought, Mr Hall became involved in the program.

“We skip ahead a generation in genetic gain because we are using the latest bulls from Te Mania,” he said.

The alternative was to purchase bulls at \$20,000 and greater but Mr Hall said he could not justify the expense. “I couldn’t compete with the top price although I would have liked to access the genetics,” he said.

Mr Hall compared the cost of purchasing bulls at \$5000 to \$7000 each with the cost of leasing them for the three-year period offered as part of the Team Te Mania deal.

“Ultimately, the costs were on par, so the benefit was getting the latest genetics because we were turning over our bulls every three years,” he said.

Costs like transport from the Victorian border were also factored into his comparative equation.

Mr Hall said any bulls that broke down were replaced by Te Mania so he only had fully fit sires in his battery.

Besides the benefits of group marketing, the knowledge sharing between members was positive and goes a long way to improving the viability of their operations.

Mr Hall said he was using a combination of leasing bulls and artificial insemination (AI) in his annual joining program. “Straws at \$13 are a fantastic deal,” he said.

“We get reasonably good conception rates but still back up with a natural joining.” The females are chemically co-ordinated to cycle at a certain time and all are inseminated during that period. Costs included \$30.85 per cow for the drugs and insemination, plus travel of \$200 per day.