

WA CATTLE FOCUS FARMS - PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF BENCHMARKING STUDY

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In the high rainfall (>800mm) region of the South West of Western Australia the potential exists for profitable beef production, but the variability in performance of enterprises is very large. A recent survey showed that the most profitable farms used some form of controlled or rotational grazing and their gross margins (GM) increased with stocking rate (SR) (Kingdon and Sawyer 1994). GM/ha, SR and carcass turnoff of these farms were \$303, 1.23 breeding units/ha and 178 kg/ha compared with average measures of \$196, 1.01 and 149 kg/ha. The current project was initiated to extend profitable beef management practices/controlled grazing for improved turnoff of kg carcass sold per hectare.

Four focus farms were established in 1994 and 1 in 1995. All except farm 'A' (SR of 1.54 breeding units/ha and GM/ha of \$345) were typical district beef properties, producing vealer calves from Angus X Friesian or Hereford X Friesian dams and mainly Simmental bulls, with lower than average gross margin/ha returns. Pastures on three paddocks of each farm (15-85% of the grazable area) were intensively monitored using pasture cages. Actual (normal farm practice - pasture measured and cut before and after grazing) versus potential (pasture measured and cut according to 3 leaf stage of ryegrass growth) pasture utilisation were measured. Cows and calves were weighed at strategic times in the annual production cycle and fertility records, turn off and car-case data were collected.

Table 1. Animal production performance on all focus farms

Parameter	Farm/Year								
	A		B		C		D		E
	'94	'95	'94	'95	'94	'95	'94	'95	'95
No. calves	108	124	75	95	52	54	46	88	68
Grazed hectares	89	89	103	120	85	80	58	96	80
Calving spread (days)	67	78	88	71	104	88	46	44	80
Avg calving date	16/2	13/2	16/12	28/1	09/3	31/3	12/2	10/2	08/3
ADG 100 days (kg/day)	0.88	0.90	0.82	0.78	0.57	0.79	0.94	0.81	0.79
ADG 200 days (kg/day)	1.25	1.04	0.78	0.78	0.78	1.06	1.10	1.10	0.97
Weaning weight (kg)	371	384	278	327	270	300	358	357	343
% at market specs	90%	92%	17%	75%	6%	0%	98%	90%	34%
Weaning age (days)	270	285	286	301	270	261	264	302	294
Liveweight of vealer/ha	450	483	202	248	164	243	284	328	291

On all farms actual utilisation of pasture (mean 8.3 tonne DM/ha, range 4-9 tonne DM/ha,) was less than potential utilisation based on grazing ryegrass at the 3 leaf stage, but variation in paddocks was considerable. Initial results prompted management changes for 1995 including: sub division of paddocks using electric tape fencing and an increase in stocking rate (Table 1), matching the date of calving with pasture availability, pregnancy testing, improved bull selection and using calf performance data to cull cows. Notwithstanding the differences between years/grazing seasons and confounding expected in a study such as this, trends towards an increase in the production of vealer liveweight/ha on all properties (7-48% increase), are encouraging. Further years of monitoring will be required to confirm the trends and assist in setting and improving targets based on first year performance.

KINGDON, B.K. and SAWYER, G.J. (1994) W.A. *J. Agric.* 35: 140-4.