

Drought and climate adaptation program

GrazingFutures Case Study:

Striving for weight gain in the drought – Improving market access and other flow on effects

Background

“Beechwood” is an 11,000-hectare property near Teelba in southern Queensland, owned and operated by Ben and Bindy Lasker. The Lasker’s run a self-replacing cattle breeding operation comprised of a Santa Gertrudis based herd. Normally they run up to 1000 breeders, turning off feeder steers to local feedlots at 420kg – 450kg live weight, and retaining the heifers as replacement breeders.

Ben and Bindy are first generation landholders who have done the hard yards to bring themselves into the beef industry purchasing the property around 10 years ago, with no family assistance or family property connections. In November 2019, at the height of the devastating drought, Ben and Bindy attended the Hold ‘Em or Fold ‘Em – Risk Based Decision Making and Resilience workshop in Surat, a collaborative event led by ConnectAg on behalf of Maranoa Regional Council in partnership with the Queensland Government GrazingFutures project and the Tackling Regional Adversity through Integrated Care project.



Bindy and Ben Lasker "Beechwood", Teelba attended the GrazingFutures Hold ‘Em or Fold ‘Em – risk-based decision making and resilience workshop in Surat.

Guest speakers at this workshop included Cam Nicholson (Nicon Rural Services) Andrew Wilkie (Objective Livestock Marketing), Tim Ford (Feed Central), Roger Sneath (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries), Jill Alexander (Applied Ag) and Mary O’Brien (Are you bogged mate?). During this workshop, producers gained an improved understanding of meeting market specifications, dry season feeding of beef cattle, options for sourcing drought feed and how they approach business decision making and their mental wellbeing. The Lasker’s commented:

“We could so easily have not gone to this workshop, but we are so glad we did.”

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Changing nutrition during the drought

Prior to the workshop (which was held during extreme drought conditions), the Lasker's felt financially they couldn't continue to feed their stock to maintain the herd. Plus, they had no confidence in the saleability of stock they had on hand to offload and destock further. They had already taken proactive steps and reduced the herd to around 650 cows and about 500 weaners by that stage, compared to normally running 1000 breeders.

As a result of attending the workshop the Lasker's focused more on the nutrition of the cows and weaners moving to a ration for weight gain as opposed to maintenance. Based on the information they heard at the Hold 'em or Fold 'em workshop, this would open market opportunities for their stock should the drought continue. The Lasker's commented:

"By bringing our cows up to a particular weight we could sell them direct to the works and make much better money per animal than what we were looking at if we had sold them as light stores in December and reduced the cost of feeding by going to a maintenance ration at the time."

The cows were fed a high quality, Top Country 'feedlot' formulated ration. Ben and Bindy were confident this additional cost to the business would reduce further economic risk because of what they had learned at the workshop.

At the same time, they adopted the practice of very early weaning and feeding these young weaners based on the information presented by Roger Sneath (Department of Agriculture and Fisheries) at the workshop. Roger Sneath said early weaning to remove the lactation stress on the cow was an excellent management tool to consider during severe droughts. He added that the lactating cow will receive little benefit if fed extra feed (while still supporting a calf) as it will just go through the milk to the calf. From the workshop advice they were prepared to wean as young as 5-6 weeks old and feed these young weaners a Top Country 100 pellet ration. Feeding a high energy and high protein ration formulated specifically for early weaners was crucial to the success. They were able to meet the nutritional demands of these weaners by feeding the pellet ration together with a good quality oaten hay, whilst also improving their breeder cow condition and health by removing the calf.

"The cost of the feed was terrifying, but we had the confidence of a formulated ration to bring the cows up to market specification and improve sale price," said Bindy.

The value of the workshop for producers

The Lasker's found the nutritional advice from Roger Sneath about dry season feeding and early weaning, and Andrew Wilkie's (Objective Livestock Marketing) information on market specifications and options for selling cows very beneficial. Andrew spoke about market options and the ability to sell cows direct to the works once they had reached a certain weight. He advised against producers keeping old cows on farm struggling just to maintain weight. As a result, the Lasker's made the decision to feed for weight gain in their cows, rather than simply maintain their condition. "We

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asked ourselves – do we sell all our cows now for a low price and low weight or do we put money into nutrition for them to increase their weight?” Ben remarked.

The workshop presentations provided some clarity on what decisions needed to be made to manage the nutrition of their beef cattle herd. Prior to attending this workshop, the Lasker’s felt very out of control and thought they were not handling the drought well.

Benefits of feeding for weight gain during drought

As a result of increasing the nutritional ration from maintenance to weight gain, the cows reached a weight suitable for selling direct to the works. This avoided a potential financial loss had they been sold earlier as light cows. However, by sale time, it had rained enough to grow useful pasture and the Lasker’s were able to look at retaining those breeders. The cows had reached a condition score of 3 because of improved nutrition and were therefore suitable for joining.

Other changes

As a consequence of limited grass and a poor-quality diet due to the drought, the calving window had progressively become irregular and longer than desired. An unintended consequence of improving the nutrition from maintenance to weight gain helped tighten calving windows once there was a break in the drought. This meant only one weaning round, which reduced workloads and improved ease of management of the herd. It has also meant more consistent, larger lines of weaners than the Lasker’s would normally expect.

Other unintended benefits included improvements in fertility with 98% of their maiden heifer’s pregnancy tested in calf this year (2021) following the breeder nutrition improvements. (These were the calves that were weaned at 5-6 weeks old in December 2019). In 2020, 95% of their maiden heifers which had been fed the high-quality feedlot ration were in-calf. Before 2019 (prior to the workshop), the Lasker’s would generally expect conception rates of around 85% in maiden heifers. Ben and Bindy believe this is a consequence of the calves’ improved nutrition from such an early age, and the continual rise in this plain of nutrition over their life. These 2021 maiden heifers weighed in at 480-500kg at around 18 months old.

Improving nutrition has enabled the Lasker’s to retain a profitable sized herd without purchasing replacement stock in an expensive re-stocking market. They have also been able to take advantage of the record market with the early weaners from December 2019, weaned just weeks after the workshop, selling as steers early in 2021 for \$1600 / head. Had they sold them off their mothers in late 2019/early 2020 they would have received around \$120 per head.

Normally the Lasker’s would plant 350 hectares to oats to provide feed in winter, however as a result of the workshop they changed to growing a forage sorghum crop instead of oats. After the rain in January/February of 2020 they planted forage sorghum which provided a good quality roughage for the early weaners, hay production and 1000 tonne of silage which they sold for a profit.

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Breeder cow numbers have been reduced by 30% as a means of mitigating against poor seasons in the future. This breeder reduction was based on what Ben and Bindy learnt from grazing management extension specialist Jill Alexander who spoke about managing the pasture feedbase at the workshop. Reducing numbers will make the pastures go further at “Beechwood” and reduce the impact of dry seasons and drought by preventing over utilisation.

Wrap up

From the workshop, Ben and Bindy, learnt enough to collectively make the right decisions for them at the time and take back some control. They have also created some key rules to ensure they ‘make a move’ when the seasonal conditions and other influences on their business move into a negative phase. This will ensure their business is more resilient and better prepared should they be faced with challenging droughts in the future.

Ben summarised with *“Even though the drought cost a lot, it has had financial benefits flowing on into the future.”*

“Because we went together and both heard the same information, we were then able to discuss options for our business and implement them immediately. Had we not been there together we may not have had such a good outcome.” Bindy said.

Created by: Gina Mace, ConnectAg, on behalf of GrazingFutures

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