

Breeder herd recording leads to more confident decisions

Producer Case Study, June 2021



Photo: David Andersen 2021

Background

David Andersen is a beef producer on the Atherton Tableland in far north Queensland. He moved into beef production after a background in the dairy industry and a 20-year career in the Army and has been at his current property at Malanda since 2016. On his 90 hectare property (220 acres), David runs a 120 cow Brangus breeding herd, seasonal calving over a 3 month period. The property consists of volcanic soils, supporting high quality *Setaria* and *Urochloa* pastures and various legumes.

David's goal in managing his property is, *"As a small operator I want to try and have my farm and my cows running as efficiently as possible and have the best outcome while looking after the farm. It is a very good farm as it was an ex-dairy farm. It has been very well maintained over many years and I'm continuing on looking after it."*

Involvement with FutureBeef

David describes himself as having *"a keen interest in beef cattle and I like to learn as much as I can. I am trying to keep an open mind and try different techniques that are keeping up to date with the latest teachings."* He has seen much change in the industry and uses FutureBeef as a tool to help him stay informed. *"Things have changed and it's good to keep on top of it. FutureBeef is one of those tools that keeps you up to date on the latest teaching and different things you can try."*

At a glance

Owner & location

David Andersen
Malanda, Atherton Tableland,
Far North Queensland

Property Size

90 hectares

Pastures & soils

Setaria and Brachiaria based pastures with legumes including Creeping verna, Desmodium and Stylo.

Average rainfall

1600 mm

Cattle enterprise

120 Brangus breeders are mated to either a black Limousin or ultra-black bull.

Target market

Weaners are sold to local buyers for fattening.

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David has found FutureBeef's knowledge resources and webinars influential in providing him with the latest techniques in beef production. Last year he participated in many FutureBeef webinars which have led to changes in the way he records information and makes decisions about his cattle breeding herd. David explained,

"During COVID I got to catch up with a few webinars and attended some training that I wouldn't normally get to because they are not run in our district. One of them was about getting as much information as you can and making your decisions. It was all about herd management and getting the best outcomes."

"The webinar went into the management of the weaners. It got me thinking about ways I can improve it and that's when I went down the path of really recording everything and having it as a management tool."

"I'm always looking to improve and it certainly made me think I can improve on how I'm recording things and increase what I'm recording and use it as a good decision tool."

The move to data recording

As a result of the FutureBeef webinar, David has significantly increased the amount of data he collects on his breeding cows as well as their calves and has invested in a herd recording program (CattleLink). David has upgraded his scales and electronic NLIS tag reader to enable him to electronically record cattle weights monthly. In addition to recording weights David uses the CattleLink software to record traits such as time of calving, temperament, incidence of ticks, fly lesions, other health indicators and any animal treatments he applies. David further explained his herd recording,

"Everything comes through on their [grazing] rotation once a month. I bring them through the yards and if I have to do any treatments, I do that or check them out. They all get weighed, the calves and the cows. I record any sort of thing I notice, such as if the cow has lesions from flies, I will note that down and which ones don't have any, and the same with ticks."

"I am building up this picture with my breeders and with the calves. I can look at the program and see their daily weight gain, which are the cows that have good milk, and which ones that aren't doing as well. I also record time of calving, where they calved in the 3-month calving period and how they compare to the year before. If there is one that is constantly at the end of the calving period, then I know she is struggling to get in calf straight away compared to the others who are more fertile."

"Everything gets recorded and I have a really good picture on every animal. Sometimes you see an animal that is limping. Now everything gets recorded, the next time she comes in there is an alert to check out her leg."

Making more confident decisions

Recording information is one thing but the power of having data comes in using it to make more informed management decisions. The increased data recording has enabled David to more confidently make decisions relating to his breeder management. *"It builds up this great picture for me in making management decisions."* David is aiming to eventually have a super herd *"... where they are very fertile and all good milkers."*

Previously David culled cows that were dry. Now thanks to his increased herd data he has the ability to consider multiple traits. He explains this as, *"I was just making the decisions on if they weren't calving. Rather than cull on only one trait, I wanted to know, out of my cows on my list for potential culling, which ones should I cull, and which ones should I give a second chance."*

David now has a list of priority traits for deciding which cows to cull from his herd, listed in order of priority as:

1. Temperament.
2. Ability to get in calf.
3. Performance of the calf and whether the calf has sufficient quantity and quality milk.
4. The time of calving / how fertile she is. Prioritising those that calve at the start of the calving period.
5. Health of the animals e.g. ticks, lameness.

David explained that temperament is his number one trait because he operates his property by himself and has young children, he likes to get in amongst his cattle and he weighs his calves in the first 24 hours after birth. He explained, *“If any animal is displaying anything I don’t like it gets recorded and if anything is too bad it will be put on a cull list straight away. You don’t want to muck around with it and to get injured. I don’t need anything that is going to be a risk. Even if they are good producers and they tick all the other boxes if they are going to look at you twice or charge you then they are gone.”*

Impacts

Investing in an electronic herd recording program has led to a significant saving of time and enabled ease of access of his herd data in a usable format. *“It certainly makes it a lot easier than writing everything down, where it becomes messy and hard to get. When it’s on this program, it gives you graphs and instant access to all that information and on this program, you can download them off your weighing device straight to the computer and the program and it cuts out a lot of time.”* David explained.

Using the data collected is improving David’s ability to make informed decisions relating to culling and replacements heifers. He explained *“It will also help me make future management decisions in what replacement bull or AI semen genetics I need to improve my herd.”* The weight data is to evaluate business performance as David calculates the kilos of beef produced per dollar earned each year.

Benefits

David listed time, efficiency and increased knowledge of his herd performance as the key benefits of his increased herd recording and data collection.

“Time wise it saves a lot of time. It has definitely made it more efficient. I can record all the treatments with batch numbers, and should I get audited I can print it all out and have it all there, rather than before when it was stored in folders and on paper.”

“Now I can look up a cow and see how she is performing. You might look at a cow and she looks great, has a good udder and then you might look at the calf and it might not be so good. Then you look on the history and see her calves are not putting on the desired weight I want, so she might be struggling with her milk.”

“It allows me to make my farm more efficient and to get the most out of it. I don’t want to waste grass on the cattle that aren’t performing.”

Take home messages

Whilst David admits his ability to collect the sheer volume of data is influenced by his property size, he strongly believes that data is key regardless of size. His advice to others is to use any data they can collect as a management tool to make more informed decisions. He explained,

“I’m in a situation where, when my cattle do their rotation, I can bring them in once a month. I record everything, check them and treat them and it gives me that good all-round awareness of how my cattle are going. Being a small operator it’s much easier to do than the larger ones where it might be a bit more difficult.”

“Data is very important, and you want to make the most out of your property. If you can record the weight of your calves and see which of your breeders are performing and which ones are under-performing and it’s certainly a great tool to have for when you are going to make those decisions on culling.”

Summary

Herd recording has enabled David to compare his animals based on their performance and has increased his ability to make informed breeder management decisions. David now considers breeder traits including temperament, milking ability, fertility, health and susceptibility to ticks and flies. Investing in herd recording software has allowed David to electronically store data and analyse and report on his herd.



Photo: David Andersen 2021

This case study was written by Sophie Folder of Pear Consulting for the 'A review of user satisfaction with FutureBeef communication tools and impact on practice change' project for the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. The author acknowledges the contribution of David Andersen to this case study and thanks him for his willingness to participate and share his story of change with others.

