

Realising the win wins of using pain relief

Producer Case Study, June 2021

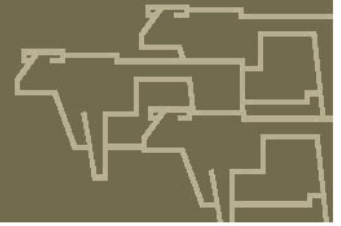


Photo: Herb & Sue George 2021

Background

Herb and Sue George run a 1000 head breeding operation on their 35,000 hectare (86,500 acres) Glen Valley property at Jundah in the channel country of Western Queensland. They have a Santa Gertrudis herd with some Angus and Angus cross cattle, turning off weaners or backgrounder steers for the EU market.

The property has been in Herb's family for 125 years and five generations. Sue describes the property as having *"Typical channel country pastures of mainly annuals and native pastures."* Their channel country contains a mix of Mitchell, Flinders and button grasses and other herbage, their spinifex and mulga country has browsing species and forbs and they have some introduced Buffel grass on their red country. Sue explained, *"There is a little bit of Buffel introduced in the red country but because of our low rainfall it is very slow to spread."*

Sue describes their aims for their property management as looking to, *"Make more money, turn off more kilos with our available grass, improve our genetics and generally turn off the best beef article we can."*

At a glance

Owner & location

Herb and Sue George
'Glen Valley', Jundah, Western Queensland

Property Size

35,000 ha (86,500 acres)

Pastures & soils

Channel country: Mitchell, Flinders and Button grasses with other herbage
Spinifex and Mulga country: browsing species and forbs
Red country: introduced Buffel grass.

Average rainfall

250 mm

Cattle enterprise

1000 head (incl. 600 breeders)
breeding operation of Santa Gertrudis and some Angus / Angus cross bred cattle.

Target market

Selling weaner steers or backgrounder steers into the EU market.

Involvement with FutureBeef

Herb and Sue receive the FutureBeef eBulletin and regularly use the FutureBeef website as a knowledge resource. Sue explained *“FutureBeef is good, as producers, we are time poor, and the website is wonderful. I would like to take part in more webinars but don’t always have the time, but the knowledge and resources are there, and people can go to them at any time of the day and search [for] the information they need.”*

The decision to use pain relief

Last year Herb and Sue took part in a FutureBeef webinar on the use of pain relief. This webinar and related pain relief information resources, accessed on the FutureBeef website (including articles and a table of pain relief products), helped influence their decision to move to using pain relief with their cattle husbandry practices. They are now using pain relief when they dehorn, brand and castrate their calves. Sue explained, *“The FutureBeef webinar, the articles and the publications all ran together over a 6-month period. It was also a hot topic within the industry. I’m on the Western Queensland Regional Beef Research Committee, (a subcommittee of the North Australia Beef Research Council) and it was a very popular topic for the committee. So, all the dots lined up.”*

They spoke with other producers and their vet to seek their views and experiences to help cement their decision. Other producers shared their experiences of improved welfare, temperament, reduced stress and flow on benefits at weaning from using pain relief during dehorning, castration and branding. Sue explained, *“We spoke with a couple of producers that had experienced really positive effects from it.... One producer is with a pastoral company. They are that adamant [it helps] that if they run out, they send somebody 300-600km to go and get another bottle, which makes you stop, listen and wonder a bit.”*

“From talking with other producers, aside from the welfare side, it seemed to make a huge difference with the stress on the cattle and their actual temperament by using the pain relief. Then you reap the benefits at weaning time, with a much more settled beast.”

“Our vet had worked closer to the coast, and she was saying a lot of properties were using it and it was becoming part and parcel of their normal husbandry practices. She was very supportive of us using the product and helping us to source it.”

Once they had made the decision to trial pain relief options with their cattle, Sue found the resources on the FutureBeef website particularly useful. She explained *“I went to the FutureBeef website where I knew they had a table in their knowledge centre, to get the listings of what I wanted and the amount I needed per kilo of calf. It was the decision that got us over the line when I costed it out and worked out what we needed.”*

Drivers for change

For Herb and Sue the driver for the change to commence using pain relief with their calves (during dehorning, branding and castration) was a desire for improved animal welfare and the improved quality of their beef cattle. Sue explained, *“We took the view we wanted to turn off the best product we could. We are working on and improving where we go with our cattle herd in the future. You need to be accountable for all those sorts of things currently.”*

The George’s see the use of pain relief as necessary for the future of the beef industry and something that will become standard practice for supporting the high welfare standards of the industry. Sue explained, *“Moving forward for producers, we are going to have to have proof that we are doing the best we can with the product we have. Animal welfare in today’s society and environment – you have to be proactive in running viable, sustainable businesses and if we can do something that improves our management but also the welfare of how we treat our animals then it’s a win-win situation.”*

“We delved into it with our husbandry practices such as castrating and dehorning. We have always put some product on to try and ease the burden of pain and insects. [We have] sterilised our EU tags and used antiseptic oil or spray on their heads.”

“So, with the pain relief we are trying to keep up with where the industry is heading and the best products to deliver and which we are financially able to use.”

Implementing the change

Herb and Sue have been trialling different pain relief options over the last 12 months at Glen Valley and have changed the products used to best suit their needs. After an initial trial of an open-wound spray-on local anaesthetic (Tri-Solfen®), they have now moved to using an injectable non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) called Metacam®. Sue explained their trial process,

“We initially tried Tri-Solfen®. We found that especially with dehorning, where we are, in a hot part of Western Queensland ... a lot of it ran off and it didn't seem to give us a lot of change. It didn't seem to make a difference to the temperament of the cattle and settling them. Then we trialled Metacam® at our last branding. It involves a whole practice change, as you put them in the race, inject it and it takes 15 minutes to work. We were very impressed with how it worked. It settled the calves in the cradle when my husband was castrating.”

“I have been talking with a pain relief specialist with cattle in the last few weeks and she explained that the Tri-Solfen® is a local anaesthetic whereas the [NSAID] Metacam® is more like a Panadol / Ibuprofen and it is meant to be retained for 72 hours. We went down that path as we have larger land areas. We brand and then put them in a holding paddock overnight and walk them probably 10km the next day. We found with no pain relief a lot of the calves hid under trees and in long grass [during mustering]. With the pain relief they mother much better, and they walk away well. It's nice to know that they are getting some pain relief and hopefully for 72 hours.”

Herb and Sue have adjusted their yard procedures to allow time for administering the NSAID and for it to take effect before castrating, dehorning and branding takes place. They have initially trialled it with their male calves and heifers with horns. Sue explained the process, *“They come into the race, we only fit 4-5 head in there. We have an injectable gun that you screw the [pain relief] bottle onto the top. They are injected and usually by the time you get yourself moving it is starting to work. ...we ear mark them first and castration is the next step [for the male calves], and they seem to physically settle when you have them in the cradle.”*

“...like any new thing we were determined to make it work and it's just natural now. You don't seem to notice that it takes a little bit longer when you brand the calves.”

The photos (right) show the pain relief being administered at Glen Valley prior to branding.



Photos: Herb George administering NSAID injectable pain relief prior to branding.

Impacts

The use of pain relief has had a positive impact on the ease of mustering the cows and calves after dehorning, castrating and branding. This has saved time as the cattle are displaying better mothering and the calves are less inclined to sulk. Sue explained, *“It has probably cut back about a third of the time from mustering them out of the holding paddock and getting them to walk away. This is due to the better mothering. They are happy to travel, not as prone to lay around in the yards and sulk.”*

Benefits

The benefits of using pain relief are a win-win for the cattle as well as the producers. Sue explained, *“We have found the pain relief beneficial; we get better mothering, it is much easier on the labour force and its kinder to the cattle.”*

Sue described the key benefits of their new practice in the points below:

- **Improved animal welfare** – *“Along with everything else we do, using pain relief has probably a 5-10% improvement with our welfare practices. The difference [in] the calf at branding time when you have given them the pain relief injection is very noticeable. There is not that sulkiness and stress on the animal.”*
- **Improved safety for producers and staff** – *“The cattle are much more settled. [It] takes a lot of the danger of the producer being hurt away as they don’t kick as much, which is a huge benefit when castrating.”*
- **Improved ease of handling and behaviour** – *“We only muster them to brand and then to wean, and they seem to remember going up the branding race. If you have a calf or a weaner in the yards that is more manageable, then they are going to go onto feed better and be a more settled animal. It’s got to have a positive flow on effect throughout their lifetime. Considering their first exposure to humans is drafting and up the branding race it’s got to be a huge positive for our industry.”*

Whilst still early days of using pain relief at Glen Valley, Sue and Herb are hoping they will see the flow on benefits come weaning time through increased weaning percentages and weights. Sue explained, *“The evidence says that long term it does make a difference to weaning weights and we hope our weaning rates should be up marginally by reducing stress and subsequent deaths. It’s all going to be positive.”*



Take home messages

Sue's advice for other producers considering the use of pain relief with their cattle is:

- **Trial it with an open mind** - *"Trial it and give it a go. Don't have any preconceived concepts of how it's going to be a small change in your previous practices. Go into it with an open mind and hopefully be suitably impressed, we have been."*
- **Seek advice and be prepared when you try it** – *"Be proactive and be set up for it."*
- **Be prepared to try different pain relief options available to get the best fit** – *"Due to the timing of when we dehorn, the weather is hot, and we have found the injectable NSAIDs pain relief options are a better fit for us."*

For Herb and Sue, the use of pain relief is here to stay and something they will continue to use into the future, as Sue explains, *"I can't see us not doing it now, it will just become part of our everyday practice. It costs us \$6 per head for Metacam® and it is money well spent."*

"We're looking after our animals and if anything could be a positive, it is to look after livestock. It has so many flow-on effects and it's so positive for our industry going forward."

Summary

Herb and Sue's experience in using pain relief in their calves during dehorning, castrating and branding has highlighted many useful points.

- Pain relief was introduced to improve animal welfare and improve productivity. There were also operator benefits via improved safety by having more settled cattle.
- Both spray-on local anaesthetic and injectable NSAID options for pain relief were trialled, before settling on one that worked for them (NSAID).
- They had to adjust their yard practice but believe it was worth it.
- Their advice to other producers is to seek advice, ask around and understand how others are using pain relief, then trial it first while you decide what works for you.

Sue and Herb believe anything that can be done to improve animal welfare is good for their animals, the business and the industry.



Photo: Herb & Sue George

Pain relief options

The use of registered pain relief products is not currently mandatory within the Australian beef industry although it is recommended as best practice for improved animal welfare and alleviating pain caused during necessary surgical cattle husbandry practices (e.g. dehorning, castrating, and branding). Pain relief options for cattle may include but are not limited to the following:

- **Local anaesthetic** – Tri-Solfen® is applied to wounds as a spray directly after or during procedures to provide pain relief (local anaesthetic), reduces blood loss (adrenalin) and enhances wound healing (cetrimide). It provides immediate effect and lasts for 24 hours. It is available over the counter. An injectable local anaesthetic is available (Lignocaine®) which needs to be administered by a vet.
- **NSAIDs** – are analgesics that reduce pain by suppressing inflammation. They do not totally block (anaesthetise) pain. There are currently 33 registered NSAIDs for use in cattle. The product described in this case study is Metacam® which is applied by subcutaneous injection. It takes effect within 10-15 minutes, providing pain relief benefits for up to 3 days. An oral suspension is also available (Buccalgesic®). Both are available by prescription from a vet.

(Source: Cattle Council Australia, 2020)

It is advised that beef producers seek the advice of a vet when deciding on the best pain relief options for their cattle and personal situation.

Further resources related to pain relief in cattle are available on the FutureBeef website including:

- FutureBeef article - futurebeef.com.au/knowledge-centre/pain-relief/
- FutureBeef webinar - futurebeef.com.au/knowledge-centre/is-pain-relief-just-another-pain-for-graziers-and-are-horns-a-pain/
- Cattle Council Australia pain relief guide - futurebeef.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/201008-CCA-pain-relief-guide.pdf

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