

# Belah Valley Brahman herd thrives

By INGA STÜNZNER

LET your environment dictate your choice of cattle genetics, not the market.

This is the advice of Russell Lethbridge, Werrington, who has a breeding enterprise three hours north of Hughenden, north Queensland.

"We probably operate in the hardest 25 per cent environment for raising beef in Australia," he said.

The family-owned property is 760 metres above sea level and temperatures range from minus-10C in winter to more than 40C in summer.

Because the area is prone to frost, stripping protein from the pastures, protein levels are low for seven to eight months of the year.

"There aren't too many animals that can survive – let alone be productive – in that environment," Mr Lethbridge said.

Despite this, Werrington is a profitable business, with cattle being sold into the top seven markets: grassfed domestic, grass-fed ox, 70-day feedlot, 100-day Jap ox, grainfed, US market and live export.

The majority of cattle are finished at the Lethbridge's second property, Rainmore, in central Queensland, which is managed by son Clayton and daughter Kate.

Those destined for live export head straight from Werrington, where Mr Lethbridge and his wife Donna live with parents Lux and Linley.

Accessing multiple markets has been due to finding cattle with the right genetic traits that suit the conditions.

"It has been through careful selection

and looking for cattle that will tolerate a harsh environment," Mr Lethbridge said.

"People often allow the perception of a market to dictate what genetics they use rather than the environment they are trying to run the animals in.

"I can only get production out of this environment with these highly adaptive animals."

Before finding the right cattle, Werrington focused on a supplementation program and was spending a lot of money, time and effort and received minimal productivity results.

From the mid-1980s, the Lethbridges had been selecting and culling their herd based on fertility, although they would purchase bulls that had not been put through any regime.

"We were killing unproductive cows and the incoming bulls weren't tested, and I guess any improvements we were gaining were from management, not genetics."

This genetic turning point was when the Lethbridges came across Belah Valley cattle in Marlborough, where owner Alf Collins had carefully selected cattle suitable for north Queensland.

"The thing is, there are Brahmans, and then there are Brahmans that are no more adapted than European breeds."

Belah Valley cows would calve every year, early in the season, without fail – even in dry conditions – and bulls were selected for their mother's fertile traits. In addition, these cattle were early maturing.

They had been selected for early puberty, meaning better pregnancy rates in maiden heifers and steers being marketable at any time.



Russell Lethbridge, Werrington, was at last year's Belah Valley bull sale and has been a regular buyer for more than 16 years.

The cattle also were able to flourish on less feed than other breeds.

"When we added these genetics, things just sped up."

Werrington has used Belah Valley bulls for 16-17 years, and in that time those genetics have further improved.

"To survive in this business, you need to have every single tool available to you, particularly when you have an environment against you and a cost of production against us that will never get away," Mr Lethbridge said.

"So if it means sourcing the most adapted animals for our environment, then that is what we have got to do."

The success at Werrington has been the result of right genetic traits coupled with a change in focus for profitability.

Rather than measuring a return per animal, it is done on per hectare of land.

Mr Lethbridge said it was a numbers game – it was the number of calves hitting the ground that kept the business going.

This means looking for efficient, moderately framed cows that calve early in the season – year in, year out.

Rather than running one 700kg cow and having one calf, on the same amount of

land he can run two 400kg cows and have two calves. "The bigger animal takes a lot more nutrition and needs high-energy pasture.

"It's like the difference between running a four-cylinder car versus a V8 – at the end of the day both vehicles will get you there, but one will cost you more," he said.

The Werrington herd is pregnancy tested back to a 120-day joining period, which is consistently producing a conception rate of between 72-82 per cent.

Despite the selection pressure on fertility, which automatically results in a moderately framed animal, the turn-off weight of the cull cows has increased slightly over the past five years, pointing to the do-ability of the animal.

This is also thanks to feed efficiency – these cattle eat less but still put on weight and maintain weight in the dry.

Over the past two years, where Queensland has proven to have a very fickle environment, Werrington has still been able to market its animals.

"While they may not achieve those huge weights, they lose a lot less; they still mature and we still get them to a marketable weight."

The Lethbridges do not have to wait three

to four years for an animal to reach the right weight.

In addition, Werrington has had no mortalities in its herd from environmental pressures in the past decade.

This year, a 92.5pc pregnancy rate was achieved in over 1000 maiden heifers with 100-day joining.

"For their entire lives these heifers have been subjected to harsh seasonal conditions and two failed wet seasons.

"There is a bit of management there, but this is in a part of the world where there have been some tough conditions."

On a recent study into breeder productivity, it was shown that re-breed rates at Werrington in first calf heifers were six times above the district average.

Mr Lethbridge advised that one of the best indicators that your cattle suit your environment is by looking at how the bulls in the paddock are handling conditions at the end of the dry season.

"If your bulls are poor and half dying, they are not raising a calf or doing anything spectacular, so then you need to look at your genetics. It's tough enough in our industry, so we don't need genetics working against us as well," he said.



RIGHT: The success at Werrington has been the result of right genetic traits coupled with a change in focus for profitability.

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