

96/W04



Producer Research Support

Satellite farms speed rate of technology transfer in WA
Beef Improvement Association (WA)



The establishment of 'satellite' demonstration farms under this Producer Research Support project resulted in the rapid transfer of technology and changed management practice.

Key points

- The Producer Research Support project was very successful at demonstrating the benefits of best practice management among progressive producers but 'traditional farmers' were hesitant to adopt practices that had not been demonstrated to work on a 'local' farm.

The project

Seventeen 'satellite' demonstration farms established under a Producer Research Support project were the catalyst for the rapid uptake of controlled grazing and other best practice by beef producers in the south-west of WA. According to BIA (WA) secretary, John Lucey, veterinarians reported increased use of the full serving capacity test to evaluate the reproductive soundness and fertility of bulls while there had been an increase in the number of WA beef producers harvesting their own ryegrass to reduce production costs and increase productivity.

The project was initiated and undertaken by the Beef Improvement Association (WA Branch), with technical assistance supplied by Agriculture WA to: "increase the rate of adoption of proven technology on beef farms by actively involving groups of producers in initiating and monitoring best management practices on local satellite farms."

Objective

Increase the rate of adoption of proven technology on beef farms by actively involving groups of producers in initiating and monitoring best management practices on local satellite farms.

What was done

The Satellite Farm Project was initiated as a direct result of positive producer feedback to the previous Producer Research Support project, 94/WA03 'Focus Farms for Profitable Beef Production', designed to establish locally based demonstration farms in the southwest of WA.

The five focus farms were intensively monitored and used to demonstrate best practice management. The 1994 Producer Research Support project was very successful at demonstrating the benefits of best practice management among progressive producers but 'traditional farmers' were hesitant to adopt practices that had not been demonstrated to work on a 'local' farm.

Mr Lucey said to overcome this scepticism the BIA (WA) undertook to establish local satellite farms throughout the south-west and employ well proven adult learning principles of actively involving producers in their learning process; and providing the ability for producers to learn by "looking over the fence".

Seventeen 'satellite farms' were established from Pinjarra in the north down to Rosa Glen in the south and out to Pemberton, Bridgetown and Collie in the east.

Satellite farmers were identified from Focus Farm field day attendees as producers willing to:

1. Use BeefFarm physical and financial performance program;
2. Adopt best practice management, in particular controlled grazing, and demonstrating a desire to change; and
3. Network with other producers in sharing successes and failures.

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Producer Research Support

MLA Producer Research Support offers support funding of up to \$15,000 over three years for groups of producers keen to be active in on-farm research and demonstration trials.

These activities include:

- Producer Initiated Research and Development
- More Beef from Pastures demonstration trials
- Prime Time Wean More Lambs demonstration trials
- Sustainable and productive grazing grants.

Contact Gerald Martin
Producer Research Support Coordinator.

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Four teams comprising the local focus farmer, together with an experienced Agriculture WA beef development officer and technician, were allocated about four satellite farms to "caretake" and provide technical advice and support in adopting improved management practice.

These 'clusters' of satellite farms were brought together to help develop the most appropriate extension program for their local knowledge of networks and producer needs.

Mr Lucey said as a result of these cluster satellite farmer meetings, it was agreed that there was a need to run a comprehensive pasture grazing management workshop to bring everybody up to speed on improved grazing management and pasture budgeting.

Two one-day Pasture Grazing Management Workshops were run with the Satellite Farmers which covered:

- pasture growth and pasture utilisation;
- controlled grazing;
- pasture assessment in practice;
- seasonal grazing management;
- feed budgeting; and
- feed budgeting in practice.

Feedback from the satellite farmers at these workshops was used to develop a Grazing Management Workshop that has been used with other local beef groups, sections of which have now been incorporated into the delivery of Prograze in WA.

The satellite farmers were encouraged to monitor the performance of a portion of their herd and farm using 'controlled grazing' — rotating a herd around a section of the farm at a rate determined by the time taken for the grazed area to re-grow three ryegrass leaves.

Satellite farmers were provided with a rising plate metre to assess pasture growth and yield fortnightly to enable them to develop an effective controlled grazing system and to start a system of pasture budgeting.

These fortnightly recordings were provided to the satellite farmers' nominated beef development officer who provided support in helping each satellite farmer develop their grazing management skills.

Throughout the growing season the satellite farmers were encouraged to host farm walks when they believed there was something useful for their neighbours and interested local producers to 'see'.

To expand the network of producers involved in learning from the satellite farms, all local stock agents were kept involved of the satellite farm activities and encouraged to organise groups of their clients to visit the satellite farms.

As part of the overall grazing management package developed using the satellite farms, a number of different methods were trialed to develop recommendations for successful seed set management of pastures.



MLA also recommends BeefPlan

BeefPlan is a non-traditional approach to learning. Groups of like-minded beef producers, work together as a management team to focus on property management. Importantly the learning agenda is set and controlled by the group.

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EDGEnetwork

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An annual review of the project was held with the BIA (WA) executive and all the satellite farms.

An outcome of this meeting was the decision to establish some simple demonstrations/trials on each satellite farm tackling what had been identified as key local issues.

With each satellite farm tackling different issues this ensured that the satellite farms contributed significantly to the local beef production systems.

At this meeting a standardised calf weighing procedure was agreed to in an attempt to verify the earlier work initiated to develop a simple strategic weighing recommendation to allow producers to accurately predict the ability to finish their calves as vealers.

Discussion

Mr Lucey said the success of the satellite farm project in increasing the rate of adoption of improved best practice management practices by south-west beef producers could be directly attributed to the activities, demonstrations on and the information generated from the satellite farms. These included:

- regular farm walks — attended by over 600 producers;
- demonstrations to investigate local 'problems/issues', alternative legumes, fertiliser, re-seeding deep ripping, weed control, spray grazing, fodder crops, growth promotants, seed set management, seed harvesting, strategic weighing and marketing;
- controlled grazing newsletter containing topical advice and updates on satellite farms performance;
- controlled grazing hotline — immediate advice on grazing management issues;
- newspaper articles including satellite farm profiles and successes;
- strategic weighing — development of ability to use 150 day weighing to make appropriate management and marketing decisions on predictions on whether a calf will or will not finish as a vealer;
- seed set management and harvesting with specific field days to assist producers develop practical and effective seed set management; and
- a beef grazing management video.

Mr Lucey said the satellite farmers had maintained their on-going learning process through other group involvement in activities such as Prograze and Better Business (the WA-based property management program).

"All satellite farmers have continued to improve their marketing system, using strategic weighing to negotiate more confidently with processors, knowing that they can produce to specifications more consistently."

He said the enthusiasm of the individual satellite farmers was evidence of their motivation and willingness to adopt new management practices. The feedback from the satellite farmers was the knowledge that they had a 'team' of experienced farmers and Agriculture WA officers to provide advice when needed, gave them the confidence to try new practices.

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On the broader uptake by local producers of best practice management, the most successful farm walks were those organised informally to look at change as it presented itself throughout the season. The feedback from local producers was that they appreciated being able to follow a production system over two years.

"It is interesting to note that the satellite farm project was the catalyst for many other successful groups forming, such as a number of Prograze groups initiated by a satellite farmer.

"A highlight was the decision by eight satellite farmers to undertake the first WA Property Management Planning Course in 1997/98, with the result that many of this group are now undertaking considerable changes with their businesses."

He said both the satellite farm and focus farm projects had generated considerable information on grazing management for south-west beef herds. This has now been brought together in a beef grazing management video and a soon to be released controlled grazing manual. Mr Lucey said the BIA (WA) had successfully completed two Producer Research Support projects and was now keen to support regional groups undertake their own Producer Research Support projects.

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