mla Your levies at work // August 2014

Feedback

Everyone's a winner

Sorting out your soils:

A note from the MD...

During my first six weeks as Managing Director of MLA, I have been engaging with levy payers as much as possible to discuss what MLA delivers for the industry and to get feedback on how we can make MLA better for levy payers.

It has become clear levy payers want to know more about how their levies are invested in MLA's R&D and marketing programs, and I have committed to enhancing ways we can have improved levy payer engagement moving forward.

I have attended two MLA Board meetings, where there has been a strong focus on how MLA delivers for the producer. The Board has also accepted the recent public criticism of MLA's response to the R&D systems review, and one of my priorities now is to close it out and report back to stakeholders.

We are committed to understanding how to better deliver the on-farm R&D producers want, making sure they know what R&D is being done, how the levy is being spent and what the deliverables are.

I have also conducted a thorough review of the effectiveness and efficiency of the way MLA operates as a whole and we are on track to implement the outcomes of that review mid-August.

The recently released cattle projections mid-year update, and soon to be released sheep projections update both point to a more positive outlook into 2015, seasons permitting. The strong global demand for our meat and livestock is set to remain or grow.

MLA's efforts in market access over a number of years, working with industry to gain access to countries such as China and the Middle East, and through the FTAs with Japan and Korea, will deliver rewards for levy investments.

MLA will continue to assist the industry to ensure markets remain open and to position our product as a high value, quality product across the globe.

Please contact me any time
managingdirector@mla.com.au

Richard Norton
MLA Managing Director

Contents

Cover: Tasmanian Challengers John and Annie Ramsay with their sons, Henry, 2 and Alex,3. Image by Steve Lovegrove.

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Building capability

Tasmanians take out MLA Challenge

Bothwell sheep producers John and Annie Ramsay were announced the winners of the MLA Challenge at an event in Sydney on 29 July.

John said they were incredibly surprised to have won, given the calibre of the other five families in the MLA Challenge.

"All the other Challengers were really impressive. They have all made great changes throughout the year and have amazing stories to tell."

In order of their final ranking in the competition the other five Challengers were: beef producers Andrew and Megan Miller from Windorah, Queensland; sheep producers Marcus and Shannon Sounness from Amelup, Western Australia; beef producers Matthew and Angela Pearce from Adelong, NSW; beef producers Bill and Georgia Wilson from Edi, Victoria; and beef producers Lachlan and Anna Hughes from Dulacca, Queensland.

MLA's General Manager Livestock Production Innovation, Peter Vaughan, congratulated the Ramsays on their win.

"After a year the Ramsay's sheep pregnancy scanning results have risen from 135% to 175%, they are turning off 30% more lambs, at an earlier time, and their labour efficiency has improved from 7,000 dry sheep equivalent/full time equivalent, to 8,500 DSE/FTE," Peter said.

"The final scores of all six competitors were extremely close, and all six have shown what Australian producers can achieve by using the tools and resources at their disposal.

"Australian red meat producers should take heed that no matter where your farm is, there are tools that are relevant and beneficial to your operation and can improve your productivity and profitability – the Challengers have shown how it can be done."

John said the MLA Challenge had inspired him and his wife to set a new business strategy with high goals.

"It was out with the Merinos, out with three lambing dates, out with winter lambing and out with excessive hay making," he said.

"Instead, we went in with crossbred ewes (including 2,000 extra head), in with spring lambing and in with a whole new simplified system producing more meat/hectare.

"The results have been fantastic. After changing to crossbred ewes we have produced 30% more lambs – potentially earning us an additional $75,000.

"By the end of June we had turned off 6,500 lambs, compared to 3,000 lambs the year before. The increase comes from producing more second cross lambs and from focusing on finishing them more quickly and effectively. At $100/lamb, that's a major improvement, plus we can run more ewes through winter without the lambs hanging around."

The Ramsays run 14,000 head on their two properties, totalling 2,800ha at Bothwell and Dysart, Tasmania.

"MLA's tools have been excellent, particularly the Feed Demand Calculator, which we relied on heavily. I also had a light bulb moment hearing judge Sam Newsome from Agripath explain that the top 20% of producers manage their team well – I knew I had to focus more on the people side of the business," John said.

Susan Bower, Westpac's Head of Agribusiness and one of the MLA Challenge judges, said "Each Challenger has spent 12 months focusing on their business, using the best tools, resources and advice available, and the positive results achieved across all areas of their triple bottom lines speak for themselves."

The MLA Challenge was supported by Woolworths, Westpac Agribusiness and QantasLink.

Read learnings of the Challengers and their mentors on pages 8-11.

www.mla.com.au/challenge

Quick quiz

LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION ASSURANCE
STAND BY WHAT YOU SELL

Producers are encouraged to test their on-farm food safety knowledge with a new online quiz, developed by the Livestock Production Assurance (LPA) program.

The 22 questions cover topics including farm risk factors, hazards and chemical residues, record keeping, withholding periods, transportation and the importance of maintaining the integrity of LPA.

Take the quiz at:
www.mla.com.au/LPAquiz

Grazing the sustainable way

A new online resource for producers on grazing techniques that increase productivity while reducing methane emissions is now available.

***Sustainable grazing – a producer guide* contains five sections which outline best practice and references relevant tools and case studies of producers implementing these practices.**

MLA Research Extension Manager – Sustainability, Irene Sobotta, said by following principles and management factors outlined in the resource, producers can increase efficiency and environmental performance.

The five sections cover:

→ running a sustainable grazing business

→ climate variability – using water wisely

→ healthy fertile soils

→ productive, persistent and profitable pastures

→ grazing management

"There are a number of benefits of having productive pastures, including opportunities to reduce emissions from livestock production such as finishing stock more quickly, which gives an animal less time to produce methane," Irene said.

The resource is based on the MLA publications *Towards sustainable grazing* and *Grazing land management: Sustainable and productive natural resource management* and incorporates the latest research outcomes and knowledge.

The resource has been developed as part of MLA's Farm300 initiative, which aims to increase the profitability of livestock enterprises while reducing greenhouse gas emissions intensity.

Farm300 is funded by the Australian Government and managed by MLA in partnership with the Australian Farm Institute, Australian Wool Innovation and Dairy Australia.

Access the resource at: **www.mla.com.au/Sustainable-grazing-a-producer-resource**

Practical programs win awards

The Sheep CRC won two major research awards at the 2014 CRC Association Awards.

The first was the Star Award for high level engagement with small and medium sized businesses through its Managing Scanned Ewes program and the second was the Excellence in Innovation award for RamSelect.

Managing Scanned Ewes delivered 88 scanning workshops to 1,800 producers, resulting in 80% of attendees making practice change. It is estimated improved use of pregnancy scanning data and increased uptake of testing has led to an additional 500,000 lambs born each year or a 15% increase in reproductive efficiency.

RamSelect was developed by the CRC and the NSW Department of Primary Industries with input from Sheep Genetics, MLA, Australian Wool Innovation and the private sector to provide a 'hands-on' approach to using Australian Sheep Breeding Values (ASBVs) to maximise genetic gain.

The program delivered 73 workshops to 1,389 participants with more than 95% indicating they had an improved understanding of ASBVs as a result and 85% saying they would use them to select rams in the future.

Sheep CRC Chief Executive Professor James Rowe said both programs showed the impact of effective collaboration between public sector researchers and private sector providers in creating a platform for sharing knowledge.

Parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Primary Industries Bob Baldwin (left) presents the awards to the Sheep CRC's Professor James Rowe, Sheepmeat Council of Australia Vice President Jeff Murray and Sheep CRC Program Director Dr Andrew Thompson.

www.sheepcrc.org.au

Giving disease priority

The MLA-funded National Livestock Disease Survey will research which endemic livestock diseases are the most costly to the cattle, sheep and goat industries in Australia. This information will help set future research investment priorities.

Project leader Joe Lane, from consulting company GHD, said producers, veterinarians, processors, governments and industry members would be surveyed to identify the priority diseases.

"Previous studies have taken a narrow approach, with a small group suggesting what the priority diseases were," Joe said.

"In this survey we are hoping to tap into everyone in the industry to get a truer picture."

Initially, 300 producers will be interviewed, based on their location and enterprise.

"We want to know what producers believe the priorities are and the impacts on productivity and profitability, the costs of prevention and whether or not prevention is successful," Joe said.

"We are deliberately not asking if they think particular diseases are a problem, because we think we will get more accurate results if we get them to say what they see as problems."

The project will also survey veterinarians, animal health companies and meat processors.

"Some diseases may not be evident to producers but show up at abattoirs, such as liver fluke, which causes livers to be condemned for human consumption," Joe said.

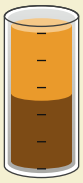
"In the second phase, we will analyse the priority diseases to work out what we know and what we don't know, so we can determine the best approach to deal with them."

Findings are due at the end of this year.

Joe Lane // T: 02 4222 2321
E: joe.lane@ghd.com

Project dashboard: Livestock disease survey – Phases 1 and 2

Financial contributions to the project:
$192,000



MLA levies: **50%**

Government: **50%**

Length of project:
6 months

Start date: 20/03/2014
Finish date: 01/10/2014

The project is part of MLA's objective to:
Create opportunities through research to minimise the threat and impact of exotic, emerging and endemic diseases on Australian livestock enterprises.

$772m cost of parasites to the sheep industry (includes internal parasites, flies and lice), 2006

$224m cost of parasites to the cattle industry (includes ticks and internal parasites), 2006

Mobile markets

A new free MLA mobile app provides producers with the latest livestock market information whenever and wherever they need it.

The MLA market information app enables users to stay informed of news updates and market intelligence across the beef, sheep and goat industries in an easy-to-use mobile format.

The app offers the latest market news, customised searches for local and global market reports and the ability to look up price and supply indicator graphs.

The MLA market information mobile app is available now to download free to your mobile from the **Apple iTunes App Store or Google Play**, by searching 'MLA market information'.

Lodge your Levies Notice

MLA members are encouraged to obtain their full voting rights for this year's annual general meeting (AGM) by submitting their Levies Notice by post or online.

All MLA members received a Levies Notice by mail in July. By returning this notice or lodging online, members inform MLA of the amount of levies paid last financial year.

This is voluntary, but it is important that members lodge their levies to receive their full voting entitlement for all meetings and polls held in 2014-15, in particular this year's AGM.

To ensure you receive your full voting entitlements, return your Levies Notice or lodge online by 2 October 2014.

T: 1800 675 717 or E: **membership@mla.com.au**

To find out more, go to **www. mla.com.au/voting**

Soil management

From the ground up

Soil is the most important resource in agricultural enterprises, so its management is crucial to the triple bottom line – environmental, economic and social outcomes. Yet only 15% of all soil tests conducted in Australia are for pasture paddocks (and that includes those from dairy farms).

Plan ahead before applying phosphorous to your soils.

If you're applying fertiliser and not soil testing you may as well tear up money and throw it on the ground, according to Agricultural Economist Lee Beattie.

"There are helpful decision-making tools out there, it's just a matter of knowing where to find them and learning how to use them," she said.

There are tools to establish a fertiliser budget, determine return on investment, to compare different fertiliser products relative to phosphorous (P) content and cost, and to test the value of strategic use of nitrogen (N) and gibberellic acid.

"The key to all of these, of course, is the soil test. You can't manage what you haven't measured," Lee said.

(See the story on effective soil testing on page 16.)

At the other end, it is crucial to plan to capitalise on the additional pasture production with grazing strategies, increased stocking rates and reduced supplementary feeding.

According to CSIRO Senior Principal Research Scientist, Richard Simpson, soil health should not be daunting. He said it was never too late to start a good management program.

"Fertiliser underpins pasture productivity but costs have more than doubled in the past 10 years and make up a considerable proportion of variable costs in many grazing operations," he said

"Fertiliser investments based on anything other than objective soil testing are just guess work."

Long term outlook

Lee acknowledged that in some years producers just don't have the money to invest in fertiliser.

"But missing P applications for a year or two can take some time and investment to catch up on," she said.

"This is why soil testing is critical and a whole farm soil fertility plan can help better decisions for the long term."

Richard said soil testing was not just an economic issue, it was also about good stewardship of the land.

"It is important that we protect our waterways and soil health and can show we are using these resources sustainably," he said.

Richard cited the development of the Monaro Farming Systems Soil Club (see profile on page 14) as a great example of how much can be achieved in a relatively short time.

"By co-ordinating their efforts the members saved money on soil tests, improved their farm management plans and have pooled their data to form a district-wide soil fertility picture," he said.

"A major benefit is that it is much easier to see how to apply P strategically."

Where to start

Initially at least, Richard recommended developing a soil fertility management plan with an agronomist with good local knowledge. Start small, keep it manageable and you don't need to know everything all at once, he said.

"As producers' experience and knowledge builds they will be able to ask tougher questions of their agronomist," he said.

"Work out the soil fertility targets that are right for your soils and stocking rates. Think long term about where you want to take the productivity of each paddock."

Dollars and sense

Lee also highlighted the importance of soil testing before establishing new pastures.

"Sowing pastures requires considerable investment and you want to know there are no deficiencies, such as potassium or sulphur, or issues with the soil that will affect persistence," she said.

When it comes to deciding on how much to invest in soil testing, Lee said common sense should prevail.

"Tests cost about $60 for each core sample so you need to look at that in the context of your entire fertiliser budget," she said.

"If you're spending $30,000 a year on fertiliser then $500 on soil tests can be easily recouped by targeting paddocks that will be more responsive, addressing trace element deficiencies, and identifying areas that may not need P.

"If your fertiliser budget is $6,000 and you know your paddocks are generally deficient in P, due to little or no fertiliser history, then you would be far more conservative."

Soil-friendly tools and resources

Lee and Richard recommended the '5 Easy Steps' and its accompanying P tool.

This resource helps work out which parts of the farm to fertilise, how much should be applied to achieve desired stocking rates and payback periods. The tool also takes into account the financial impact of other related factors such as stock prices.

This free resource can be found at: **www.mla.com.au/fiveeasysteps**

Lee is also a fan of the Holbrook Landcare Group's Phosphorous Budgeting Tool.

"This is a free, Excel-based program that allows users to work on up to 20 paddocks at once, all on one page," she said.

The tool is available at **www.holbrooklandcare.org.au/hln-news/the-phosphorus-budgeting-tool/**

Also visit **www.evergraze.com.au/tools** to find other useful tools such as the EverGraze Feed Budget and Rotation Planner (includes EverGraze Stocking Rate Calculator and the Nitrogen and Gibberellic Acid Calculator).

Read about the Better Fertiliser Decisions for Pastures Project at **www.asris.csiro.au/themes/nutrient.html**

For detailed soil mapping Australia wide go to: **www.asris.csiro.au**

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Building capability

Challenge wrap-up

The MLA Challenge started in July 2013 and all six Challengers have been making changes to improve their businesses, helped by their mentors and industry.

In the past 12 months their progress has been watched from the sidelines by thousands of producers through the Challenge blogs and videos, ABC's *Landline* program and at producer events across the country.

The Challengers' progress has also been tracked by the five Challenge judges: Sam Newsome, Agripath; Susan Bower, Westpac Group; Andrew Goudie, Woolworths; and Wayne Hall and Jane Weatherley, MLA.

Here, *Feedback* talks to the Challengers about the changes they've made in their businesses, their learnings and any advice they have for producers who want to 'follow in their footsteps'.

Marcus and Shannon Sounness

Amelup, Western Australia

Marcus and Shannon Sounness and their son Preston.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.

We were prime Merino lamb producers; now we're store lamb producers. We've also made a lot of progress in succession planning, and my wife Shannon and I have developed a partnership in the farming business. Shannon feels much more confident and is more involved in the business now.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?

The impact is yet to come, but I expect it's the realisation we're better off selling lighter lambs – about 35–38kg – than trying to produce 50kg Merino lambs. A lot of the weight gain came from grain, because I turned them off during our autumn feed gap. After reading MLA's Prime Lamb Situation Analysis, talking to my mentor and using MLA's Lamb Cost of Production Calculator, I was able to recognise something I had suspected – we're just not efficient at getting to those weights. By removing those extra lambs from our system, the amount of feed available in autumn will go up and the amount of supplementary feed required will go down, reducing costs.

3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?

Question what you're doing, analyse it and get an outside opinion.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?

The Lamb Cost of Production Calculator.

Matthew and Angela Pearce

Cootamundra, NSW

Matthew and Angela Pearce with their sons Sted and Hunter and daughter, Minnie.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.

When the Challenge started the business had transitioned through succession. The Challenge encouraged us to look at the business and how we could make it adapt to meet our goals. It focused us on why we are farming, what we want to get out of it and how we're going to do that. We now have a strategic plan we put together with our mentor, Terrey.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?

Measure! By measuring anything from the feed on offer to the business performance, you can identify areas of opportunity or improvement.

3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?

Bring it back to why you are farming and what you want to get out of it, then put a plan in place to get there. There are lots of tools and resources out there to help you to walk your own 'footsteps'.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?

The tool I used the most was the Feed Demand Calculator, but the More Beef from Pastures manual was the go-to reference.

Bill and Georgia Wilson

Edi, Victoria

Georgia and Bill Wilson with children McKenzie, Lloyd and Evie.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.

We were basically producing store weaners. We're still producing store weaners but, because our grazing management is getting better and freeing up a bit more feed, we're able to grow some steers out to the heavier feeder weights. We're also bringing our calving forward and shortening it, although we won't see the results of those changes for another few years.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?

We don't need to be running a complex business to be successful. In fact, for us, the simpler we can make it, the better off we'll be. Also we need to focus on what we do really well and fine-tune those things, rather than try and reinvent the wheel.

3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?

Do the research and make the changes. It is a bit daunting, but not as bad as we thought it would be. There's plenty of information out there and the more you look, the more you find.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?

The Beef Cost of Production Calculator – we had no idea about cost of production before the Challenge.

John and Annie Ramsay

Bothwell, Tasmania

John Ramsay with his wife, Annie, and sons Henry and Alex.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.

Before we were running about 3,000 ewes which included Merinos, crossbreds and some Merinos joined to crossbreds. This year we've increased to 5,000 ewes and we're just running crossbred ewes. We've also increased our lamb turn-off. This season we sold 6,500 lambs and for the same period last year we sold just over 3,000. Our lambing percentage rose from 68% to 100%, and this spring we're hoping for 130%.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?

Question everything you're doing, don't take anything about your business for granted, then put the resources around you to make sure that, if you want to change, you change in the right way. Professional advice is a great idea.

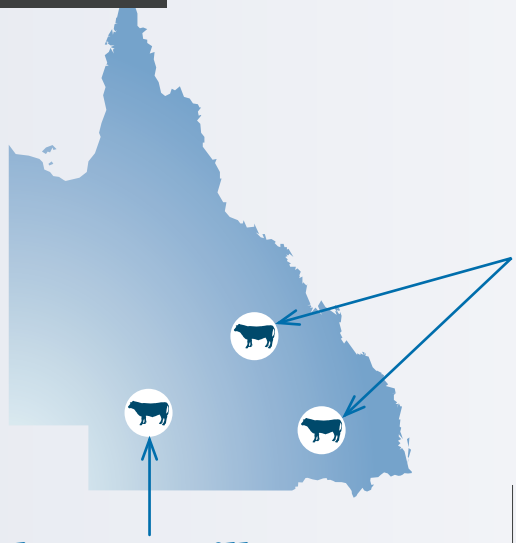
3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?

Get good advice and good people around you to help you through it. It might cost a bit, but the returns are well worth it. If it's a mentor, it might not cost you anything. Our mentor has been incredibly valuable to us.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?

The Feed Demand Calculator – a great learning tool and a great planning tool.

Building capability



Andrew and Megan Miller

Windorah, Queensland

Andrew Miller with his wife, Megan, and daughters, Alice, Bridie, and Grace.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.
We didn't have a lot of direction and weren't focusing on the right things. Our business management, as a whole, has improved and we've got clearer targets and measurements in place. The tough seasons have made it difficult to measure and compare, but one area we've measured is pregnancy testing. In May last year we scanned 59% in calf, and this year, after a much tougher 12 months, we scanned 68%. The improvement is due to better management, better segregation and a targeted feeding program.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?
We can learn something and take something from anyone, anywhere. People don't have to live in this country or have a business in this area to be worthwhile to listen to. Utilise people who are willing to help, whether they are other producers, agents or departmental staff.

3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?
Very little - everything goes better here when we're taking advice, not giving it! The more we shut up and listen to other people, the more we learn.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?
The Future Beef website has been our most utilised resource – it contains a wealth of information.

Lachlan and Anna Hughes

Dulacca, Clermont and Capella, Queensland

Lachlan and Anna Hughes and their son, William.

1) Describe your business before and after the Challenge.
We lacked direction and the ability to analyse our financial situation. We now have systems in place for every section of the business. Everyone has a defined role and we understand where the profit is made. In May this year we were carrying 1,800 head more cattle than the same time last year, when we were under-stocked. This is because, despite having the same amount of rainfall and grass, we were too slow in our decision making last year. Now we have a better structure around decision making, so as soon as it rained we bought or moved cattle. Syncing up our cows also means we've removed inefficient stock.

2) What have you learned during the Challenge?
Having a belief in our paddock-to-plate system. We were becoming very sceptical about it, but our mentor Robert Gill and Sam Newsome from Agripath helped us recognise the critical decision points and have confidence that it does work.

3) What's your advice to producers who have been watching from the sidelines and want to know what their first step should be to 'follow in your footsteps'?
If you're involved in a family business, like us, the first thing is to have a meeting and try and get some structure around decision making. Talk about it, write down a process for the year and see if you can stick to it - then adjust as necessary.

4) What was your favourite/most useful MLA tool or calculator?
The Beef Cost of Production Calculator.

Set yourself a challenge

Try some of the tools for yourself.

The MLA tools recommended by the Challengers are located at: **www.mla.com.au/tools**

Future Beef **www.futurebeef.com.au**

More Beef from Pastures **www.mla.com.au/mbfp**

Sam Newsome // T: 0477 691 692
Susan Bower // E: sbower@westpac.com.au
Andrew Goudie // E: agoudie@woolworths.com.au
Wayne Hall // E: whall@mla.com.au
Jane Weatherley // E: jweatherley@mla.com.au

www.mla.com.au/challenge

First things first

Each MLA Challenger has lauded the support given to them during the 12 month program by their mentors. And the mentors reported learning just as much in return. *Feedback* talked to all the mentors as the program came to a close and asked what they suggest as a first step for any producer wanting to improve their business.

John Keiller
Mentor to John Ramsay

If you don't do something different, everything will stay the same, so the first step is wanting to change.
The next step is to get supportive people around you to help you make the change, because it's much harder to do it on your own. Join a producer group, a farm walk group or some other type of farm discussion group so they can motivate and challenge you, as well as provide reassurance as you make the changes.

E: cashmorepark@coopworth.com.au

Terrey Johnson
Mentor to Matthew Pearce

The first step is to know you really want to make changes. If you have that attitude and mindset of truly wanting to change, the knowledge is out there. There are plenty of people around who can help and there is great value in all the MLA tools.
Find some guidance you trust and respect, then the world is your oyster. There is a bright future for beef cattle but it is going to take people with new attitudes and a willingness to really understand what the community and the customer wants from us.

E: terreyj@bigpond.com

Bill Hoffman
Mentor to Bill and Georgia Wilson

Take stock of how your business is performing at the operational level.
Use the MLA Cost of Production Calculator to establish values for two important KPIs: kilograms of beef produced and cost/kg to produce it. Ideally, examine three years' data to establish a trend profile and then do basic benchmarking to compare your outcomes with similar businesses. You can benchmark by using published data, engaging with a benchmarking company or joining a local discussion group. Use the outcomes to benchmark your business year to year against itself and to develop plans for boosting productivity and profitability. Implement those plans and continue monitoring the outcomes.

E: hoffmanbeef@gmail.com

Guy Lord
Mentor to Andrew Miller

Identify your environmental capabilities and mould a production program that suits these boundaries. You then have to decide whether you are a breeder, a grower or a finisher. If you're a breeder, you need genetics that suit your environment and markets. You then need to run a functionally efficient breeding herd.

E: branga.plains@bigpond.com

Rob Warburton
Mentor to Marcus Sounness

1. Work out what you want to achieve from farming – ask yourself 'what do I want my life to look like in 30 years?'
2. Strip down the enterprise and rebuild it on paper, starting from scratch as though you have never run it before, using all the latest information and techniques available. Compare this to what you do now. Which system returns the most to your business in terms of profit, time, environment and synergy with other enterprises?
3. How does this fit into Step 1? If it doesn't, do it again! The farm has to work for you and your goals. It's a long game; if played well, it can be very rewarding.

E: regertonwarburton@gmail.com

Robert Gill
Mentor to Lachlan Hughes

Get an independent analysis of your business that identifies your strengths and weaknesses. Work hard to your strengths – that's where you make your money – and try to build on your areas of weakness. If you excel in your strengths you make extra money to cover your weakness, and by recognising and working on your weakness, that weak link will become stronger. Also, don't be afraid to seek professional financial and agronomic advice.

E: robert@alexanderdowns.com.au

Soil management

Producers driving pasture research

Livestock producers are joining forces with researchers to put pasture R&D into the paddock, with over 20 Producer Research Sites launched this year.

With topics ranging from 'pasture persistence' to 'establishing legumes in temperate pastures' to 'strategic fertilising', these sites are part of MLA's investment in the southern feedbase, which targets an extra $25 million annually in on-farm value by 2020.

"The Producer Research Sites focus on hands-on producer involvement, supported by the technical capabilities of researchers involved in feedbase projects," Linda Hygate, MLA's Southern Feedbase Project Manager, said.

"By involving producers in designing and running trials, these projects engage end-users in research to test whether and how the research fits into their farming systems."

Feedback talked to leaders of two sites about their planned work program.

In the south

Victorian sheep producer Gerard Ryan chairs the Central Ranges Branch of the Grasslands Society of Southern Australia, which has joined forces with MLA, CSIRO and the Mackinnon Project to investigate ways to improve efficiency of phosphorus (P) fertiliser.

"Involving producers in a project like this ensures research can be applied on a practical basis in our local environment," Gerard said.

"Livestock producers want to increase input efficiency so this should give us information that is verified in our conditions to guide our fertiliser decisions."

The group will start several experiments this year to answer two questions:

→ Are there more P-efficient legumes (other than sub clover) that yield well in the different soil types of the central ranges under moderate P levels, to reduce fertiliser costs? The trial will compare yellow serradella, French (pink) serradella, biserrula, gland clover and lotus with several sub clover varieties including the new earth-mite tolerant varieties Narrikup and Rosabrook. Performance of species will be compared at moderate and high soil Olsen P.

→ What other factors could be impacting the response of pastures in high P soils? This experiment will assess if other nutrient or soil factors (nitrogen, trace elements, acidity, soil borne diseases, poor nodulation/rhizobia) are constraining pasture and legume production on poor performing paddocks and reducing efficiency of applied phosphorus.

Mackinnon Project researcher Lisa Warn from the University of Melbourne said typical fertiliser costs for Victorian livestock producers were around $3-4/DSE/year.

"So if P based fertilisers can be used more efficiently by applying less per hectare, or by applying them in a more targeted way across the farm, or by growing more pasture/kg/P applied, this will result in significant increases in gross margins," she said.

The MLA Producer Research Sites program in Victoria is supported by the state Department of Environment and Primary Industries.

In the west

Another Producer Research Site, run in conjunction with the Southern DIRT group on a property near Kojonup in Western Australia, is also looking at strategies to use P more efficiently.

This project compares legume species that potentially require less P than the standard sub-clover grown in the area. Different rates (recommended and half recommended) and formulations (liquid and granular) of P fertiliser will be applied.

The trials will be run on a farm with a low critical P value to determine the impact of P application and critical P values for alternative legume species. Measurements such as pasture cuts, plant tissue tests, annual soil tests and visual assessments will compare P uptake levels and biomass production from each pasture type in each treatment, and compare them to a control plot with no P application.

While University of Western Australia (UWA) researchers will provide technical advice to ensure the trial is scientifically valid, Southern DIRT producers are hands-on in designing the project and running the trial.

UWA Associate Professor Pasture Science, Megan Ryan, said the trial was developed with producer input to ensure the research addressed what they wanted to know.

"Producers wanted to know if they can grow different pastures with the same P input and achieve more production, or with lower P to maintain production, so the research team worked with them to develop a trial that would answer these questions," Megan said.

"It's exciting to have producers involved. It ensures research is relevant for industry and gives producers an insight into the constraints and considerations of research trials.

"The participatory model builds strong links between researchers and producers, so when we get to the point of disseminating practical outcomes from the broader feedbase project, the producers involved are an obvious choice for early adoption."

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Figure 1 Locations and themes of Producer Research Sites

Investing in the feedbase

The three top priorities for MLA's feedbase R&D are:

1. Plant breeding and evaluation
- → Pre-breeding in phalaris and annual legumes
- → Pasture Variety Trial Network
- → Evaluation of new species

2. Productive and sustainable pastures
- → Getting more pasture with less P
- → Evaluation of new legumes in mixed farming
- → Pasture species for the sub-tropics
- → Root diseases in sub-clover

3. Grazing systems management
- → Developing technology to measure pasture biomass in real time
- → EverGraze
- → Dual-purpose crops
- → Enrich

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Research at work

The latest on-farm strategies emerging from MLA's investment in research, development and extension.

In this issue

Join the club

Snapshot

Oliver and Jane Cay, Cooma, NSW.

Property:
1,600ha

Enterprise:
Wool, first cross lambs, trade cattle

Livestock:
80% Merino-based, 20% Merino ewes joined to terminal sires

Pasture:
Phalaris, cocksfoot, lucerne, sub-clover and annual grasses

Soil:
Mixture of light and heavy soils

Rainfall:
500mm

Soil management

Monaro producers are getting their hands dirty building a regional soil database and, in the process, are increasing their profitability.

The Monaro Farming Systems launched its 'Soil Club' in 2010, with 60–70 producers, representing 43 farm businesses, each year collecting soil samples to guide inputs.

The Soils Club aims to improve productivity and sustainability. It is delivering practice change and paving the way for more soil productivity activities in the Monaro region.

One of these is an MLA-funded project that looks at the effect of correcting nutrient deficiencies on pasture legume composition, the soil retention properties of different sulphur fertilisers and economic outcomes of different fertiliser strategies.

Monaro Farming Systems Chairman Oliver Cay said the club reflected producers' desire to identify optimum fertility in highly variable soils to improve productivity.

Oliver and his wife, Jane – like other local producers – have to manage Monaro's variable rainfall and soil types. Their property features basalt, granite and shale soils, and rainfall varies by up to 100mm across the farm. As a result, carrying capacity ranges from 2.5 to 14 DSE/ha.

"We face the question of how to manage different soils. Our soil isn't uniform, so why should we uniformly apply fertiliser?" he said.

Richard Simpson, CSIRO Senior Principal Research Scientist in pasture systems agronomy, has been involved from the start of the Soil Club, helping producers identify individual goals and understand how soil analysis can help achieve production targets.

Initially, each member received 10 free tests. The club now funds five tests/farm business/year, but producers are embracing the opportunity and, on average, submit seven samples for independent analysis.

The tests have identified sulphur, phosphorus and potassium shortfalls across the board. A Monaro Farming Systems producer survey found 80% of Soil Club members changed management strategies in response – some applied less fertiliser, while others increased application but were more strategic.

Oliver said it wasn't just about producing more grass. The productive slant is strong, but so is the focus on people and the environment – a property that is optimally stocked puts less stress on human and natural resources.

Oliver has seen the benefits in his own enterprise. When he started running the family property in 2002, low soil fertility enabled good responses from fertiliser. But by the time the Soil Club began, he had set his sights on more strategic input use.

"We have moved out of our capital building phase and are now in a maintenance phase – we don't want to waste fertiliser and we don't want to waste the opportunity to grow grass," he said.

"We traditionally applied a blanket rate of 125kg single super/ha, but testing our soil to understand its potential fertility allowed us to apply the right type and amount of fertiliser to achieve optimum results. We now run the same stock but have cut 20% ($15,000) off our annual fertiliser budget."

Another producer has lifted stocking rates from two to eight DSE/ha in three years.

Oliver said consistency was critical to ensure the tests built an accurate resource.

"The biggest surprise was the variation within soils tests year-to-year – seasonal conditions, stocking rates and even the laboratory are variables," he said.

Variation in testing is minimised through:

- → baseline soil tests, taken from the same place in the same paddock each year;
- → testing the same area each year in paddocks for improved consistency;
- → taking samples between 10 and 21 October each year, when standard deviation of plant growth and soil moisture is the least; and
- → 'dummy' samples, taken out of a large Monaro soil sample stored at CSIRO laboratories and included with the actual samples each year to measure variation in the testing process.

Monaro Farming Systems has joined forces with Holbrook Landcare and Tablelands Farming Systems to expand the soil database. The short-term goal is to maximise the value for producers so they can log-in to access individual data, identify trends and generate fertiliser recommendations.

20%

Fertiliser reduction on some farms for the same or better production

43

The number of farm businesses represented in the Soils Club

7

The average soil samples taken on each farm, each year

Left: Oliver Cay, with his children Arthur, Bella and Penelope, checking the soil on his Monaro property.

Lessons learned

1. Target a like-minded group who has similar goals and is willing to change practices based on scientific, respected advice.
2. Coordination is crucial. Monaro Soils Club pays a Project Officer (Nancy Spoljaric) to manage communication, events and logistics.
3. The 'Five Easy Steps' phosphorus tool (available at **www.mla.com.au/fiveeasysteps**) provides a framework for soil testing, interpretation and objective management of soil fertility.

Looking ahead, Oliver saw potential to harness the database to contribute to advanced soil management such as variable rate fertiliser on a zonal, rather than paddock, scale.

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Soil management

Taking the test

Agronomist Clare Edwards guides producers through soil testing, step-by-step.

Clare suggested producers follow five steps when considering soil testing. Clare, who works for the Central Tablelands Local Land Services at Mudgee, NSW, encouraged producers to contact their Local Land Services, agronomist, advisors or soil test laboratories for advice and support.

"If you have no prior experience, it's probably best not to go it alone. There are plenty of people and resources out there who can help you," she said.

Clare Edwards
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There is any easy to follow guide to soil testing in the *Five Easy Steps: P tool handbook* at **www.mla.com.au/fiveeasysteps**

Step 1: Understand what you want to achieve

→ Soil tests are often the first point in property planning, used to assess land capability, help make landscape management decisions and as a diagnostic tool in the case of poor plant performance.

→ Determine how soil tests will fit in the overall pasture management plan.

Step 2: Prioritise paddocks

→ It is not usually practical financially and physically to soil test each paddock annually.

→ Testing is critical prior to sowing new pasture. Priority should be also given to recently sown pastures and those that have productive and responsive pasture species.

→ Give priority to areas which have also been underperforming or where you suspect deficiencies.

Step 3: Take samples correctly

→ Follow the requirements of the laboratory in terms of volume of the sample.

→ Normal soil testing takes samples from 0–10cm depth. Deeper soil tests are from between 10–20cm.

→ Ensure the samples are representative of the area.

→ Where you take them is critical and will affect the results. Seek advice from specialists on this.

→ Avoid gullies, stock camps and all high nutrient load areas, eg ground around water troughs, gateways etc.

Step 4: Set up monitoring sites

→ Select monitoring sites representative of the paddock and soil type.

→ Accurately identify the location, say by GPS or landmark so they can be re-tested periodically, optimally at the same time of year.

→ Mark the sites on property plans and in work diaries.

→ It may take several years to see trends but this is when the value of soil testing is maximised.

Step 5: Interpreting results

→ This is the most crucial aspect of soil testing.

→ Use local advice, seek technical support and utilise tools to understand how your soil will respond to different fertilisers.

→ Put the results in context with other measurements of farm productivity to help make decisions.

Soil solutions

Feedback talks to agronomists, advisors and scientists on the soil challenges facing different agricultural regions in Australia.

Region	Challenges	Strategies	Top tips	More information
Northern Australia	• Northern producers more commonly supplement stock than fertilise pastures. • P is dropping in areas like the Brigalow Belt because of pasture rundown.	• Urea (nitrogen) can improve rundown sown pastures but returns can be marginal, so do a cost-benefit assessment. • Planting pasture legumes adds biological nitrogen but requires adequate phosphorus and sulphur[1].	Use soil tests (or leucaena leaf tests) to assess P status of sown grass pasture. MLA is currently developing a guide that will rank legumes based on their P-requirements to assist selection.	**Gavin Peck** Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Queensland Senior Pasture Agronomist (Sown Pastures) E: Gavin.Peck@daff.qld.gov.au
Northern NSW	• The continuing dry has compounded run-down of soil fertility, diminishing groundcover and pasture bulk increasing the risk of erosion and loss of the nutrient rich topsoil when breaking rains fall. • Sulphur and P deficiencies. • Areas of the Tablelands are prone to deficiencies in trace nutrients such as molybdenum and selenium. • Potassium can be deficient in forage production areas.	• Soils may have inherent limitations that cannot be corrected due to the significant and ongoing costs. Assess these, site-by-site, with professional assistance. • Broadly applying sulphur and phosphorus is beneficial in the Tablelands. However, acidity or sodicity should be addressed first, as treatment will benefit nutrient availability and soil structure, improving pasture vigour.	Maintain groundcover. Soil test to determine soil status and identify priorities. Incorporate legumes into pastures.	**Mark Blair** Senior Land Services Officer (Knowledge and Extension), Northern Tablelands Local Land Services E: mark.blair@lls.nsw.gov.au
Southern NSW	• Phosphorus is the limiting factor in 90–95% of the region. • P deficiencies dramatically decrease pasture productivity, reducing carrying capacity. • Areas with recent volcanic soils (eg Monaro and Crookwell districts) also have sulphur deficiencies.	• Soil tests can identify the critical value of P (the value above which no further response to fertiliser application is likely). • Unbalanced inputs (fertiliser) and outputs (stocking rates) can be unprofitable or further deplete soil fertility, so match stocking rates as soil fertility improves.	Use the 'Five Easy Steps' decision support tool to identify level of fertiliser required to target optimum productivity: **www.mla.com.au/fiveeasysteps**	**Phil Graham** Technical Specialist in Livestock Systems, Agriculture NSW E: phillip.graham@dpi.nsw.gov.au
Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania	• Higher fertiliser prices have reduced maintenance fertiliser applications. • Sulphur and potassium can be deficient in light, sandy soils with moderate-high rainfall (eg granite country or coastal sands) • Trace elements such as molybdenum are required every 6–7 years in acid soils, except where lime is being applied. • Copper is often deficient in sandy, coastal soils (eg Gippsland) but one application could last up to 10 years.	• Soil tests should be taken this spring to plan for applications next autumn. • P was historically the major nutrient deficiency in Victorian soils but many producers have built up P levels and can use soil tests to refine fertiliser inputs. • If P levels are well above the critical range of 12–15mg/kg (Olsen P), it is a rational, short-term, decision to not apply fertiliser, but fertiliser is required in the long term to maintain productivity and feed quality of improved pastures.	Test soil to measure macro nutrients – a clover leaf analysis in spring before clover flowers will help determine if trace elements are deficient.	**Lisa Warn** Senior Consultant with Melbourne University's Mackinnon Group E: l.warn@unimelb.edu.au
Western Australia	• Soil test results have identified soils with adequate P levels may still be constrained in production by soil acidity, potassium or sulphur deficiency.	• Test a third of the farm each year, or the whole farm every three years, more frequently in coastal sandy areas with high rainfall (>600mm). • In coastal areas with sandy soils that have low P, low water soluble phosphorus fertilisers can reduce leaching losses while increasing the residual value in subsequent years.	Seek advice from a Fertcare accredited advisor to make evidence-based fertiliser decisions from soil tests. Check your spreading equipment to ensure fertiliser distribution meets Australian Accu-spread standards, and ensure contractors are Fertcare accredited.	**David Weaver** Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia Senior Research Officer E: david.weaver@agric.wa.gov.au

1 An MLA-funded economic analysis in the Brigalow Belt revealed:
→ 9–15% returns with P fertiliser when establishing legumes into grass pastures on low P soils
→ 12–24% returns by adding P fertiliser to established grass/legume pasture

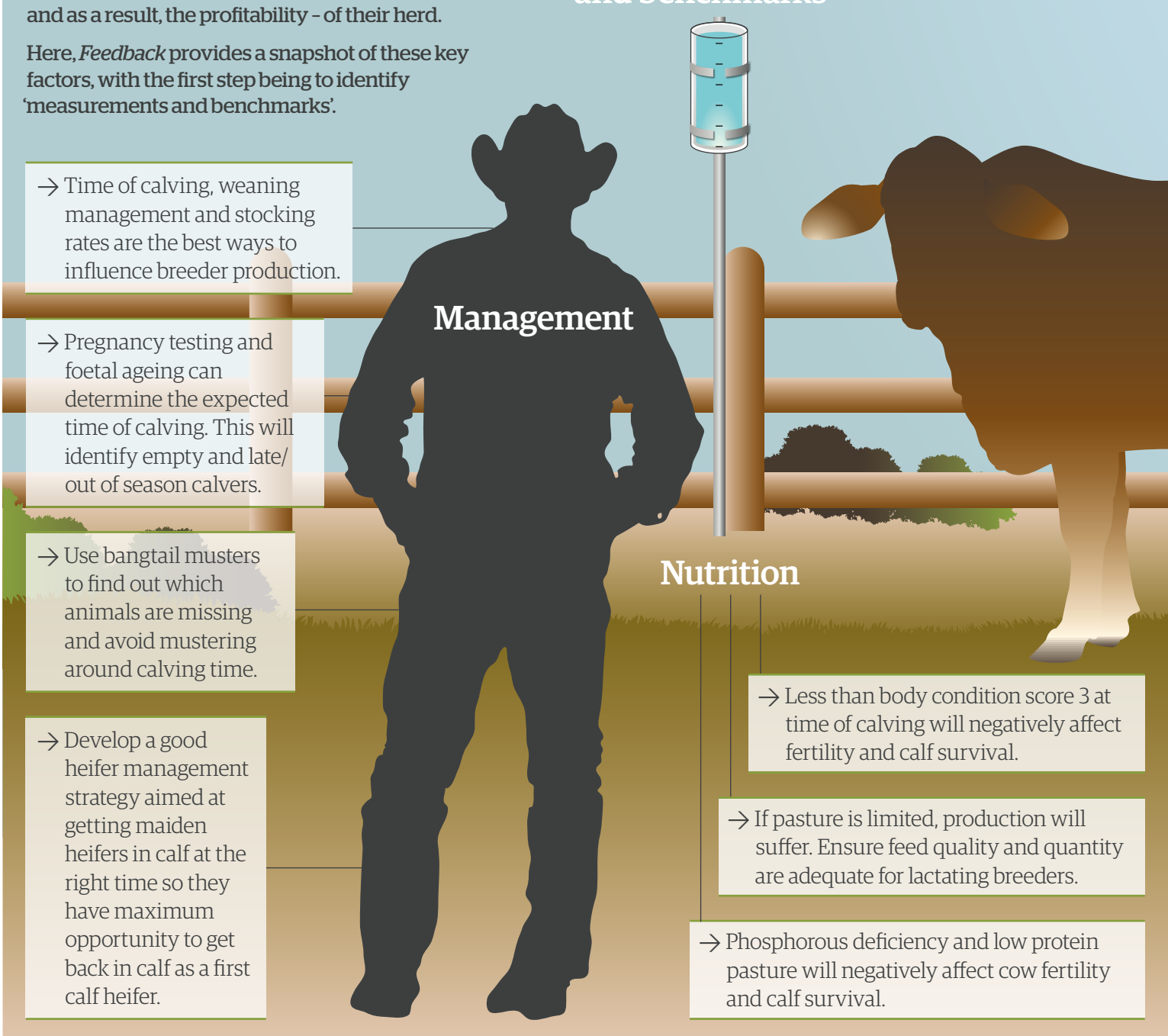
Reproductive efficiency

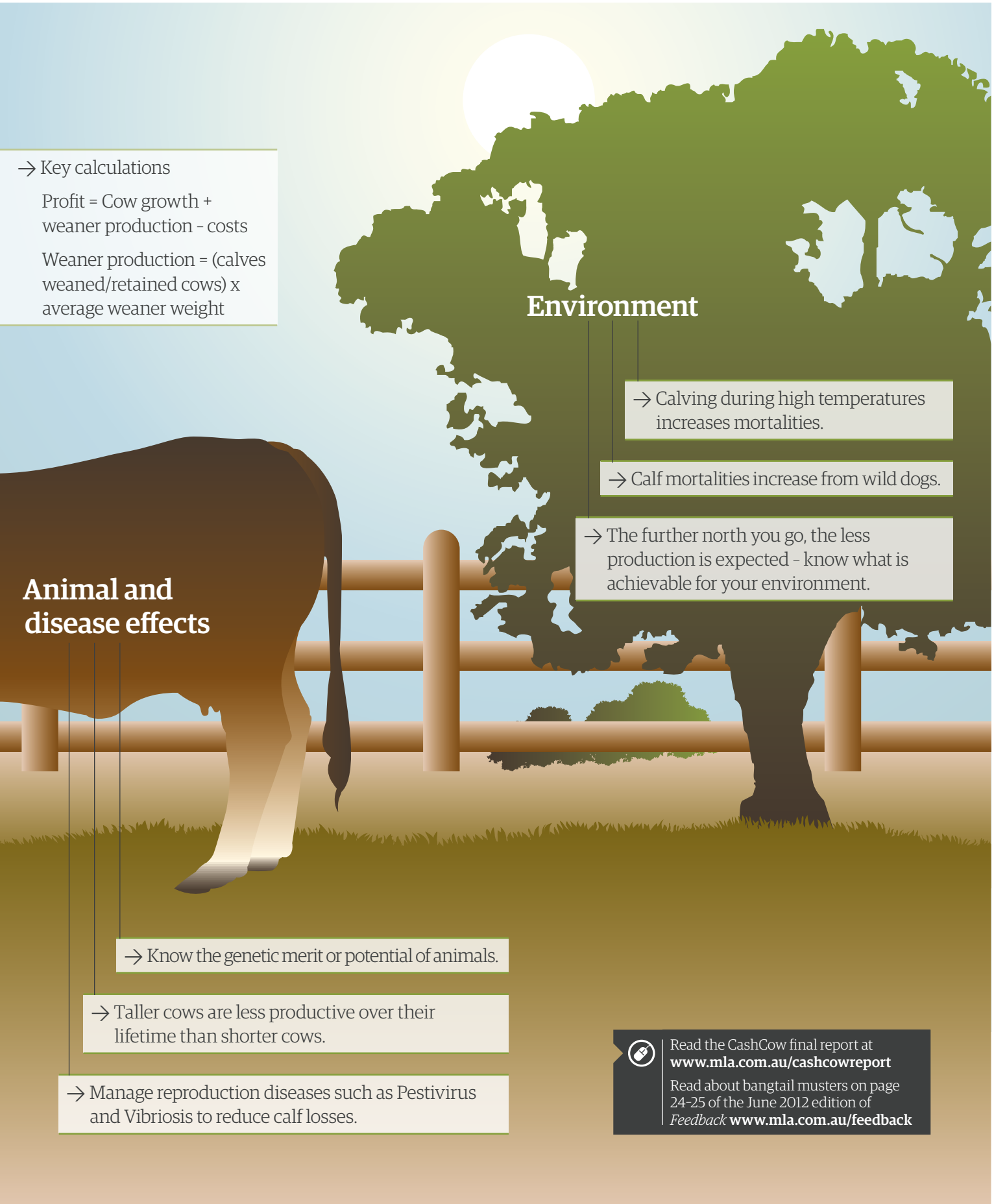
How to grow a cash cow

The research team behind the CashCow project, which focused on increasing the reproductive efficiency of the northern cattle herd, has crunched four years of data, encompassing the performance of 78,000 cows on 78 different properties in northern Australia.

The distilled data provides producers with some key factors which influence the reproductive efficiency – and as a result, the profitability – of their herd.

Here, *Feedback* provides a snapshot of these key factors, with the first step being to identify 'measurements and benchmarks'.





Read the CashCow final report at **www.mla.com.au/cashcowreport**

Read about bangtail musters on page 24-25 of the June 2012 edition of *Feedback* **www.mla.com.au/feedback**

Genetics

Snapshot

Ardie and Kacie Lord, Lord Pastoral aggregation: 'Sutherland' 640km west of Townsville, 120km north-west of Richmond in north-west Queensland; two northern forest breeder blocks, 100km (East Creek) and 170km to the north; and 'Camroo', 70km south of Tambo, Qld.

Property: 123,077ha

Enterprise: Beef breeding selling into feedlots or domestic market to the south or live export to the north; hay production selling 15,000–20,000 round bales a year

Livestock: 12,000 breeders and followers

Pasture: Buffel grass, Mitchell grass; northern blocks: spear grass, spinifex, tea tree, wattle; Camroo: Mitchell grass, blue grass, gidyea, buffel grass

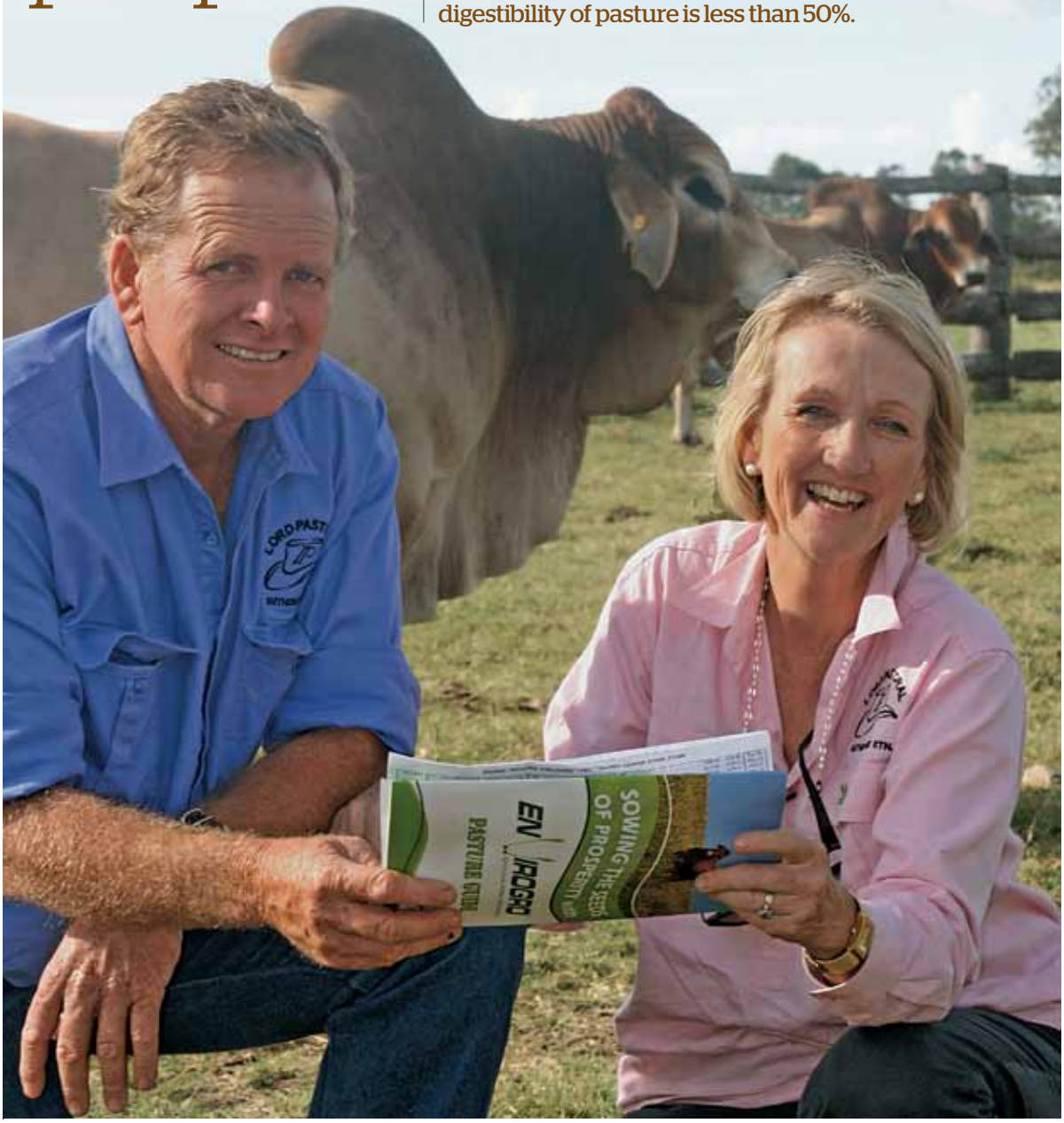
Soil: Grey, cracking, self-mulching black soils; northern blocks: phosphorous-deficient, bauhinia, gidyea, sandy forest country; Camroo: cracking, grey soils and pebbly, loam soils

Rainfall: 475–525mm

In the July edition of *Feedback* and at MLA's Meat Profit Day in Hamilton, geneticist and Director of the Animal Breeding and Genetics Unit at the University of New England Dr Rob Banks outlined the impact of genetic gain on Australia's commercial beef herd. This month we look at the response from focusing on genetics in a northern beef enterprise.

Fit for purpose

For northern beef producers Ardie and Kacie Lord, genetics is a vital tool for survival. The couple run Lord Pastoral, a 123,077ha aggregation mostly in Queensland's harsh north-west. They have breeder blocks in the tough Northern Forest country where forage protein levels are often below 5% and digestibility of pasture is less than 50%.



Rob Bank's tips:

→ Buy from studs with genetic progress of $5/cow mated/year or better.

→ Buy bulls above the breed average and use the dollar index as the point of comparison.

→ Consider investing in new genetics every year, whether your old bulls are all sound or not, to ensure your herd maintains pace with the rate of genetic gain and inflation.

The Lords' genetic selection choices are focused on survival traits such as efficient feed conversion, temperament and fertility, including early puberty.

"What we've ended up with is a type rather than a breed, although our cattle need to be at least 75% *Bos Indicus* to survive and reproduce in these conditions," Ardie said.

"Some of our customers describe what we've got here as 'flat-backed Brahmans'."

Ardie and Kacie have experimented with infusing Tropical Composite, Belmont, Tuli and Angus but have always returned to a dominant Brahman type.

They describe their cows as moderate-sized and hard-working who will produce around a 220kg carcase when finished in this environment – meaty, good doing, early to puberty, fertile and quiet.

"Colour and ears have not been a consideration. We've tried to stay focused on cattle that work for us," Ardie said.

"We pregnancy test every year and anything that's empty is culled and, because we've been applying these selection parameters for some time, a type of gentle, fleshy, early-maturing cow has emerged."

Ardie and Kacie join up to 1,600 replacement heifers at 'Sutherland', aged about 23-24 months in August, two months ahead of the main herd. They are then re-joined from 1 October.

The heifers stay at Sutherland until they are about three-and-a-half-years-old and carrying their second calf. Only the earliest breeders – those that make it through to a second pregnancy (about 40-60%) – graduate to the northern breeder blocks, where they can stay up to about 10 years old. The remainder are sold to generate cash flow.

"My ideal and most profitable 'block' cow is one that conceives on 1 October and drops a calf in July, which is weaned in December so that I have two dry units heading into the wet season to grow and put on fat," Ardie said.

What about dad?

The Lords' fertility mantra is also applied to their bull selection, with particular focus on the days to calving EBV, puberty threshold, temperament, early growth and muscle.

"The stud we work with has relentlessly pushed their cattle to perform for many years with their entire mating period often finished before the summer rains (September to January) arrive," Ardie said.

"The stud has been gathering genetic information such as days-to-calving interval and age of puberty across female lines, going back for generations. This level of reliability and predictability of genetics is something I value in their herd."

The Lords use scrotal circumference – or scrotal tone and diameter – measurements recorded by the stud as indicators of puberty threshold, and tend to visually select for muscle. Moderate 400 and 600-day growth estimated breeding values (EBVs) work well for them and temperament is not negotiable.

"We've got to be careful not to be too extreme on growth traits because we find too many negative correlations for our country," Ardie said.

"I think our breeding goals are very closely aligned with the stud we use. They have worked hard to produce Brahmans that will get in calf irrespective of the conditions and they have zero tolerance for animals that don't earn every year."

For the Lords, it is results in the market place that prove they are on the right track, such as recent feedlot data showing their steers to be above-average feed converters.

"Our cattle for the domestic market were consuming 5.9 units of feed to produce 1kg of liveweight while many cattle consume 6.2," Ardie said.

"If they're efficient feed converters in the paddock, they are generally efficient in a feedlot."

How do I find studs with higher rates of genetic progress?

The Agricultural Business Research Institute's Beef Breeding Extension Manager Christian Duff said comparing studs for genetic value was as simple as comparing bulls in sale catalogues that have EBVs and indexes available.

"In the first instance, it is a matter of looking at the dollar index that highlights the traits relevant to your operation and seeing whether that stud has bulls available that are above the breed average," he said.

"If this is the case, it is also good to know that the stud herd is improving on their index values year-by-year and by how much.

"Seedstock producers involved in BREEDPLAN also receive trend graphs on a regular basis that track their genetic progress for a range of traits in indexes compared to the breed average.

"This is not usually published but interested commercial producers should ask studs how they are performing to ensure they are sourcing genetics from herds making genetic progress."

Note: Since this article was prepared Christian Duff has moved to a new role with Angus Australia.

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Want to learn more about the power of genetics?

- → BREEDPLAN: **www.breedplan.une.edu.au**
- → Australian cattle breed societies, listed on the Australian Registered Cattle Breeders website: **www.arcba.une.edu.au**
- → *More Beef from Pastures – Module 5: Genetics* **www.mla.com.au/mbfp**
- → Animal Genetics and Breeding Unit (AGBU): **www.agbu.une.edu.au**
- → **www.futurebeef.com.au/topics/breeding-and-genetics**
- → BreedingEDGE and NutritionEDGE workshops: **www.futurebeef.com.au/workshops**

Watch Rob Banks' Hamilton MPD presentation at: **www.mla.com.au/HamiltonMPD**

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Prime lamb situation

Top producers keeping a firm grip on costs

The prime lamb industry's top 20% of producers take a disciplined approach to spending decisions and have a keen focus on maximising kilograms of lamb/DSE.

That's a finding of the *Prime Lamb Situation Analysis* commissioned by MLA and co-authored by Holmes Sackett Director Sandy McEachern, drawing on 15 years' worth of information held in the Holmes Sackett Benchmarking Database.

"The top producers are very efficiency-focused," Sandy said.

"They ask 'how do I efficiently use my labour', 'how do I efficiently use my feed', 'how can I spend less to get the same result or spend more but get commensurately more again'?

"They have great financial discipline and take the time to work out any spending decision's effects throughout the whole farm system."

The 2013 analysis revealed that lamb production has been one of the most profitable livestock enterprises, with recent high prices generating substantial profits, despite rising costs of production.

It found the gap between the top 20% and the average profit levels appear to be due to cost control and differences in kilograms of lamb produced/DSE, rather than production levels/ha.

"The key driver used to be production/ha, but there has been a lot of extension work done in this area and industry appears to have responded," Sandy said.

"Prime lamb production/ha continues to increase year-on-year, with the most profitable producers appearing to have hit a ceiling.

"The people who are making the most money now are focused on production/DSE. They also haven't been seduced into complacency by high prices and have maintained firm control over costs, particularly labour."

Production/DSE is a function of reproductive rate, growth rate to sale and sale weight, and is basically a measure of how efficiently producers are using the feed they're already growing.

"There has always been little difference in average sale weight between the top 20% and the remainder (in the Holmes Sackett database) and in recent years there has been little difference in reproductive rates between the top 20% and the average," Sandy said.

"This leaves growth-rate-to-sale as the most likely cause of differences in production/DSE."

The report recommends future extension work to help producers understand how to adjust their production system to achieve higher production/DSE, while allowing costs to be controlled.

Another recommendation is extension work to show producers how to adjust their variable expenses to better match the potential production on their farm.

The report also highlighted the need to investigate the competitiveness of lamb production in lower rainfall environments (less than 650mm), which it found were struggling to compete against cropping and wool.

It identified a number of opportunities for producers to improve productivity in the next five years, including:

- → adopting a more prudent cost structure for the market they target
- → improving the balance between pasture utilisation, stock condition and supplementary feeding
- → improving fertility of soils and pastures
- → improving labour productivity

"Producers need to continually review these potential areas for improvement," Sandy said.

"But the key is to first implement those changes that will give you the best return for the least cost."

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Resources

MLA and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) joined forces to develop Making More from Sheep, a best-practice package of information, tools and learning opportunities for Australian sheep producers.
www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au

Sheep – the simple guide to making more money with less work: high rainfall edition can be downloaded at
www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au/announcements/sheep-the-simple-guide-to-making-more-money-with-less-work-high-rainfall-edition

The Lamb Cost of Production calculator is a tool kit to help lamb and sheep producers determine their cost of production and compare their performance annually.
www.mla.com.au/tools

The Stocking Rate Calculator is designed to determine the number of cattle or sheep you should put into a paddock, based on its carrying capacity.
www.mla.com.au/stockingrate

The Feed Budget and Rotation Planner is an Excel-based tool to help producers to plan their rotational grazing systems, determine appropriate stocking rates, calculate pasture growth rates, determine how long paddocks will last and calculate the most economical ration and appropriate fertiliser rates.
www.evergraze.com.au/library-content/feed-budget-rotation-planner

The Rainfall to Pasture Growth Outlook tool presents the actual rainfall and indices of soil moisture and pasture growth for the past nine months and an outlook for the next three months for more than 3,300 locations across southern Australia.
www.mla.com.au/rpgot

Know your starting position

Prime lamb producers looking to boost their productivity should start by analysing their current business situation, according to Holmes Sackett Director Sandy McEachern (pictured below).

Sandy works with producers involved in benchmarking across eastern Australia. He said the most important step in implementing any change was to first take a good look at the business to identify gaps and potential opportunities.

"You have to understand where you are now before you can move in any other direction," Sandy said.

"There are resources such as whole farm benchmarking, cost of production, production analysis, feed budgeting and investment analysis tools available from MLA and other industry websites, department websites and advisors.

"Once you've done the analysis you have to interpret the figures – you need to understand what the numbers are telling you."

As well as examining and interpreting financial and production key performance indicators, Sandy said a consideration was: "Am I in the right market, with the right lambing date to target that market?"

"You need an efficient production system to make the best use of pastures grown, so that means the right choice of lambing date and target market," he said.

"Once you answer that question, you need to do a resource audit. You can ask: 'What resources do I reasonably need to deliver to that target market? How much labour do I need? If I have too much labour, what will I do with the extra time? How much fertiliser do I need to put out?'

"Make sure you understand what resources are required to deliver on that target and then match them appropriately."

The next step is to consider implementing changes to improve the system.

"This may involve investing in pasture renovation, new genetics or labour-saving technology," Sandy said.

"But first, you must carefully consider the potential return on investment for each change and only spend where you'll get maximum impact."

Putting learning into practice

Lamb producer Tim Leeming from Pigeon Ponds in south-west Victoria displays many of the attributes of a 'top 20% producer' identified in the *Prime Lamb Situation Analysis*. He is focused on efficient use of feed and labour, and maintains high stocking rates alongside productive pastures.

Tim and his wife Georgie bought a neighbouring 880ha property almost three years ago, bringing their holdings to 1,330ha. Since then they've built stock numbers from 3,000 to 6,500 breeding ewes.

Their goal is to drought-proof the new property. So far they've installed 50km of paddock and laneway fencing and 12km of water systems, including 30 troughs, and sown 450ha of improved pastures – phalaris, sub-clover and perennial ryegrass.

According to Tim, much of the knowledge and confidence underpinning his decisions has come from the short-course training he has done in the past 21 years, and now he delivers some of the courses himself.

"I was about 21 when I came into farming," Tim said.

"I had attempted a Bachelor of Business but found I wasn't a bean counter – even though I crunch numbers daily.

Prime lamb situation

Snapshot

Tim and Georgie Leeming, Pigeon Ponds, Vic.

Property: 1,330ha

Enterprise: Lamb production with some cattle trading and agistment

Livestock: 6,500 breeding ewes, including ewe lambs

Pasture: Mainly phalaris and perennial ryegrass with sub-clover

Soil: Sandy loam

Rainfall: 600mm

Fast facts

Tim's top 10 tips for efficiency and profitability:

- Maintain a high stocking rate
- Conduct feed-on-offer assessments
- Maintain good ground cover – monitor dry matter and have stocking rate flexibility
- Use central laneways and small paddocks
- Ensure reliable water
- Run big mobs, except when lambing
- Pregnancy scan ewes and separate twin-bearing ewes
- Invest in efficient machinery for quick and accurate supplementary feeding
- Provide as much labour as you can yourself
- Use contractors efficiently and take advantage of contract machinery

"Once I came home and started farming, I didn't have the time or money to enrol in university again, so I just did a lot of short training through MLA and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) extension programs.

"Early on I did the Prograze and Whole Farm Planning courses, and then we started benchmarking the business in 1996.

"In 1999, I was fortunate to get an off-farm job managing MLA's EDGEnetwork program in Victoria and Tasmania. I did that for three and a half years. Not only did it expose me to some of the best consultants in the country, but I also became trained in the whole suite of MLA extension programs.

"It was awesome – like going to university."

Tim now spends about 50 days a year delivering extension programs, including Lifetime Ewe Management.

A full plate

The other 315 days in the year are pretty busy too.

"We've taken on a big task with the new property," Tim said.

"When we bought the property, it had three paddocks that held sheep. We've done a lot of capital works and we've focused on working quickly and efficiently.

"They've been pretty lean years from a profitability point of view, due to the high amounts of capital injected into the farm. It's about building capacity to earn."

Labour efficiency

Efficiency measures included a central laneway system connecting small paddocks fenced to land class; troughs in each paddock with fluorescent ball floats that can be seen from the laneways; easy-care Coopworth sheep requiring minimal worm control, no mulesing or fly control; and the purchase of a large, accurate feeder that allows one person to feed 8,000 sheep in less than five hours.

Tim and Georgie do most of the work themselves, employing casual labour for jobs such as fencing, lamb marking and weaning.

They employ contractors for shearing and crutching and the goal is to complete these tasks as quickly as possible.

For shearing in January, they ran a four-stand and a three-stand shed. Together, the shearers averaged 1,400 sheep a day, shearing 8,500 head, including lambs, in six days.

For crutching last November, Tim employed three crutchers with mobile crutching trailers who crutched 1,600–1,800 ewes a day.

Careful pasture management

Tim said "growing grass, eating grass and keeping grass" were keys to success, as well as labour efficiency.

"Stocking rates are the biggest profit driver, but you can go too far," he said.

"I want to maintain a higher-than-average stocking rate for the region without turning the paddocks into dustbowls. It's very expensive to re-sow pastures, so we make sure we don't overgraze."

The Leemings' stocking rate is up to 17 DSE/ha on the home farm and about 11 DSE/ha on the new property, while the regional average is 10 DSE/ha. The goal is to reach about 14 DSE/ha on the new property.

"Our high stocking rate is based on growing grass after the autumn break, consuming heavily from August to December, and then keeping the pastures intact during summer," Tim said.

"We monitor the dry matter levels over summer and if they go to our minimum targets we take the stock off."

Feedlot-style containment areas are used after the autumn break, shutting up the ewes for three or four weeks to enable grass to get ahead of the stock.

"We spend a fair bit on feed at that time but it means our pastures are up and running when we need them," Tim said.

Watch Tim talking about lessons learned from the Making More from Sheep program at: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=aI-RSkJSLhw**

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Read the *Making More from Sheep* on-line manual or enrol in a course **www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au**

Animal health

Selecting for resilience

A new MLA-funded research project is looking for links between the strength of a lamb's immune system and its ongoing health and production performance.

The project, led by CSIRO researcher Dr Brad Hine, is using health and production trait data from the MLA Resource Flock. The current Resource Flock began as the Sheep CRC's Information Nucleus Flock (INF) in 2007.

Over five years, the INF gathered a massive database of biological and genetic information by joining 5,000 ewes each year to about 100 industry sires chosen for their genetic diversity.

MLA's Sheep R&D Project Manager Richard Apps said the aim was to develop an on-farm test that could be used to select sheep better able to cope with everyday stressors and disease challenges, without compromising productivity.

"Research has shown the immune system's activity level, or strength, is associated with an animal's resilience in the face of environmental stressors and can be an indicator of future health and performance," Richard said.

"It's also recognised that selection for higher production – with no or little emphasis on health and fitness traits – can lead to an increase in the incidence of disease, but the reverse isn't true – selection for a naturally heightened immune response doesn't appear to cause reduced productivity.

"This project is further examining these associations and will help with the design of genetic selection programs."

Starting in late 2013, the research has already involved testing the immune competence of about 600 lambs at the MLA Resource Flock site at Armidale, NSW. The 2014 lambs drop at Armidale, and Katanning, Western Australia, and 2015 lambs at Katanning will be phenotyped during the project. Additionally, the ewes at both sites will be phenotyped each year.

What is phenotyping?

A phenotype is the physical expression of a trait resulting from the interaction of the genes and the environment, for example, kilograms of weight or millimetres of fat. When a lamb is 'phenotyped' these physical expressions are measured and recorded.

Testing was conducted at the time of weaning to create a typical physiological and social stress environment. Lambs were treated with a number of commercial vaccines at standard dose rates to induce an immune response. Responses were measured and each lamb phenotyped.

The next step is for researchers to look for associations between the immune response measures collected at weaning and the lambs' known health and production traits, already recorded as part of the Resource Flock data collection.

The project will conclude in 2016, by which time about 2,400 lambs and follower ewes will have been tested and phenotyped.

"The long-term goal is increased weaning rates of lambs, decreased flock mortality rates, and overall improved production," Richard said.

Richard Apps, MLA
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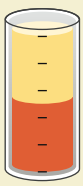
Project dashboard: Associations between immune competence, health and performance of sheep in the Resource Flock

Financial contributions to the project:
$452,531



MLA levies: **50%**

Government: **50%**

Length of project:
Start date: 15/12/2013
Finish date: 31/08/2016

Completed
6 months

The project is part of MLA's objective to:
Create opportunities to increase on-farm productivity.

Animal health

Stopping screwworm fly at the border

Fast facts

- As part of the North Australian Quarantine Strategy, fly traps are positioned at northern sea ports to trap adult flies from overseas vessels.
- Live old world screwworm (OWS) flies have entered Australia at least once. In 1988, several adult OWS were trapped in an empty livestock vessel in Darwin harbour which had just returned from delivering cattle to Brunei.
- Dead OWS flies have been found on livestock transport ships and in aircraft wheel wells.
- OWS flies belong to the blowfly family and their larvae feed on the tissue of live hosts. Any warm-blooded animal, including native fauna and occasionally humans, can be hosts.
- OWS larvae need an existing wound to penetrate animal tissue, such as a castration or de-horning wound.
- Newborn animals' navels and their mothers' vulval regions are highly susceptible to OWS fly strike.
- Larvae burrow deeply into body tissues causing severe trauma, production loss and, potentially, death.

Old world screwworm (OWS) is a serious exotic insect pest that lives on our doorstep. It has tried to get into Australia a number of times by hitching a ride on ships and travellers. It was estimated, in 2004, that OWS establishment in Australia would cost the northern beef industry $400 million annually.

An MLA-funded research project has tested the effectiveness of 10 common chemical formulations against OWS, helping to 'arm' producers and regulatory bodies in case the fly manages to 'cross the border'.

The project was a collaboration between the University of Queensland (UQ), the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Indonesian Research Centre for Veterinary Science.

Project leader and UQ Senior Research Fellow Dr Peter James said Australia's Emergency Animal Disease Preparedness program set out a two-pronged strategy for dealing with an OWS incursion:

1. Contain with chemicals.
2. Eradicate using the sterile male release technique.

"The sterile male technique works really well," Peter said.

"The new world screwworm (found in the Northern Hemisphere) used to be endemic in the United States, but it has been eradicated there and in most of Central America using the technique.

"However, for Australia to use sterile male against OWS, we would need a sterile male rearing facility. There currently isn't any such facility in the world and it would take at least two years to commission one.

"In the meantime, if there were an OWS incursion, we would be limited to chemical controls."

The difficulty with chemical control is there is only one chemical registered by the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) for use on animals

Indonesian Research Centre for Veterinary Science staff Edi Satria, Eko Purwanto, Farlin Nefo and Indonesian research leader Dr April Wardhana testing the efficacy of Australian registered parasiticides against OWS.

How to identify Old World screwworm (OWS) fly

- → Adult OWS fly are medium-sized, shiny and blue-green with some darkening to the back of the abdominal segments.
- → They look similar to close relations that are Australian species.
- → It is easier to identify the larvae.
- → OWS eggs are white in colour and are laid on the edge of wounds, all oriented in the same direction in a pattern like roof tiles.
- → The maggots are whitish to cream and have bands of dark, backward-facing spines growing on each body segment, giving them a screw-like appearance.

suffering from OWS fly myiasis, or fly strike, and this chemical gives only a short period of protection.

"The APVMA can issue permits for emergency, off-label use of pesticides already registered for animal use in Australia if they are proven to work against OWS," Peter said.

"Since the last OWS research was done, chemicals known to be effective against OWS are no longer on the market here, while new chemicals with potential efficacy against OWS had not previously been tested.

"This project was about identifying effective chemicals and then providing that efficacy data to the regulatory bodies, so they could make chemicals quickly available to producers in the event of an incursion."

The research considered chemicals to protect animals from OWS fly strike as well as parasiticides to treat animals already struck.

"When treating struck animals, we need something that will both cure them and stop the development of the next generation of flies," Peter said.

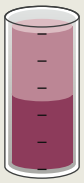
"Of the four chemicals we trialled, three worked well.

"When it came to protective chemicals we tested six different formulations. One of two that worked really well was a common chemical in a slow-release capsule formulation and the other was a spray-on formulation. They both gave complete protection for the duration of the 12-week studies."

The data will now be used to inform off-label use applications to APVMA should an OWS incursion occur.

Project dashboard: Screwworm incursions – chemical containment and eradication of screwworm incursions in Australia

Financial contributions to the project:
$163,433



MLA levies: **50%**

Government: **50%**

Length of project:
2 years 2 months

Completed
June 2014

The project is part of MLA's objective to:

Create opportunities through research to minimise the threat and impact of exotic, emerging and endemic diseases on Australian livestock enterprises.

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www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/pests-diseases-weeds/animal/screw-worm-fly

www.animalhealthaustralia.com.au/programs/emergency-animal-disease-preparedness/ausvetplan

Look for the larvae, as well as adults

Australia's old world screwworm (OWS) fly surveillance program aims to ensure early detection of the fly, particularly in high risk areas such as the northern coastline, livestock export ports and northern export abattoirs.

Surveillance includes fly trapping, quarantine officer inspection of livestock export vessels and monitoring of sentinel herds in northern Australia.

A major part of the surveillance program relies on livestock and pet owners, vets and animal health officers submitting suspicious samples collected from struck animals.

According to University of Queensland Senior Research Fellow Dr Peter James, if OWS did enter Australia, northern beef producers are unlikely to identify an OWS fly on their properties.

"OWS flies are very similar in appearance to a number of native species and occur in low densities," Peter said.

"While surveillance programs often trap adult flies, detection at the farm level is most likely to be through maggots found in wounds.

"Any larval infestation in cattle, particularly if it looks a little unusual or different to sheep blowfly larvae, is worth investigating.

"If you think there's any chance it could be screwworm fly, submit it for identification."

Larvae of OWS showing characteristic spines, which give a screw-like appearance.

Collecting OWS for identification

Suspect larvae collected from a wound should be preserved and labelled, then sent to either the state Department of Primary Industries or federal Department of Agriculture laboratories for expert identification.

"Mature larvae are best for identification, so select the largest larvae in a wound," Peter said.

"Given that OWS larvae burrow deeply into the host tissue and secondary infestation by other species is common, select the larvae from the deepest part of the wound.

"Immerse the specimens in near boiling water for 15–30 seconds then transfer them to an 80% ethanol or methanol solution for storage until they can be examined."

A label should be attached to the specimen container detailing: the full details of the property name; location where samples were collected; the date of collection; number or identification of struck animals; site of the wound; and collector's name and contact details should be recorded.

The old world screwworm fly is similar in appearance to two common Australian blowflies. Pictured from left: Old world screwworm fly (yellow face) and Chrysomya ruffiface (silver-white face).

Backing up the breed with science

The Hereford progeny test project, now in its fourth year, is road-testing the breed like never before. →

Genetics

This broad collection of genetic data is not only improving the accuracy of existing BREEDPLAN values of project sires for hard-to-measure traits, but it's also proving the long-held convictions that Herefords perform well in carcase traits and feed conversion.

Herefords Australia Chief Executive Officer, John McKew, has great faith in the project and its ability to deliver both scientific outcomes and a morale booster for members, who are committed to continuing this $500,000 per cohort (generation) R&D investment.

"In many ways, this has brought the Hereford breeding industry together with a strength of purpose to reclaim market share and be scientifically recognised for traits such as docility and feed conversion," he said.

"As results come in, it has started conversations between stud breeders and commercial producers about what is possible."

The progeny test program, running along the lines of the Beef Information Nucleus projects being undertaken by the Angus, Charolais, Limousin and Brahman breeds, was co-funded by the MLA Donor Company (which didn't involve producer levies) for the first three years and is now industry funded.

So far, it has tested the progeny of about 50 Hereford and Poll Hereford sires considered in the top 25% for important traits. It has involved 12 co-operator herds from south-west Queensland to South Australia.

Data has been collected on birth weight; calving difficulty; gestation length; 200, 400 and 600-day weights; structural soundness; docility and net feed intake.

Left: Andrew and Annie Bell's cow herd is contributing valuable genetic data to the Hereford Progeny Test program.

In the BIN

Beef Information Nucleus projects are currently underway for breeds including:

- Angus
- Charolais
- Brahman
- Limousin
- Hereford

Animals have been scanned for rib and rump fat, eye muscle area and intra-muscular fat.

Full sets of Meat Standards Australia chiller assessment data have been collected and meat samples from all carcases have been analysed for tenderness, cooking loss and intramuscular fat.

In anticipation of future genomic-based technologies, tail hairs and blood samples have been collected from all progeny to use as a source of DNA information and genotyping.

John was particularly pleased with the Cohort 2 steers' (non HGP) performance at Wanderribby feedlot at Meningie, South Australia. During a harsh winter, the animals recorded an average daily weight gain of 2kg by consuming 15.6kg/head/day, with a feed conversion ratio of 7.8:1.

"The 15-month-old steers were processed at Thomas Food International at Murray Bridge, recording an average carcase weight of 331kg and carcase price of $1,312," he said.

On a corporate level, John said Herefords Australia had developed strong relationships with collaborators such as MLA, the MLA Donor Company, Agricultural Business Research Institute, the Animal Genetics and Breeding Unit and Southern Beef Technology Services, which will help identify important future R&D projects.

"The only criticism we have received is not enough information has been flowing back to producers, but we have taken steps to address that by updating our website as information becomes available and including more material on the project in the *Hereford Australia Magazine*," John said.

"I think that grassroots criticism is really encouraging because it shows there's a huge level of interest from producers and industry, and it affirms our commitment and effort to continue this project as long as we can."

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Genetics

Seeking profitable, not pretty, cattle

When it comes to calling a spade a spade, few do it better than Poll Hereford breeder Ian Locke. He believes the Hereford progeny test project is the breed's best chance at securing its future.

Ian Locke is a commercial realist, committed to breeding profitable animals which domestic and export markets want.

He believes the best way to do this is to embrace the latest scientific and genetic tools, such as BREEDPLAN, and he has thrown his support behind the Hereford breed's largest progeny test program.

"We've had nine sires involved so far and Wirruna is also a co-operator herd to the project," Ian said.

"This project is the most efficient and accurate way to find out more about economically important traits, and those difficult-to-measure traits such as net feed efficiency. It's also a great opportunity to access good quality feedlot and carcase data."

Science not tradition

The Lockes have seen fads come and go, and their own performance recording goes back almost 50 years. They have strong ideas about how to improve the breed.

"Hereford breeders have a history of running along traditional lines and using showing and pampering as the basis for genetic improvement," Ian said.

"I think this is a flawed approach, and we owe it to commercial producers to make sure the breed is a serious financial proposition.

"If we continue along those traditional lines, I think we're destined to become animal fanciers only, rather than profitable beef producers."

To select his Wirruna bulls for the project, Ian chose his best but – intentionally – quite different sires. For example, one bull had strong growth traits while another had high marbling figures.

"We've got a lot of information flowing from the first cohort now and, so far, we've found no stark differences and no surprises in the sires' BREEDPLAN performance figures," he said.

"There have been some small adjustments and improved accuracies, but it has proved to us that Wirruna has good quality data, well linked to industry. It tells us BREEDPLAN is working well as a breeding and selection tool."

Discoveries to come

Ian has a longer-term view of the project, seeing the large-scale collection of genotypic and phenotypic information as a step closer to future developments,

Diney, Annabel, Henry and Ian share a boots-'n'-all attitude to embracing the latest scientific and genetic tools, including BREEDPLAN. Left: Wirruna heifers – Ian hopes some of these animals will join the Progeny Test Project in future years.

such as more accurate EBVs and measurements of new traits – perhaps even eye-cancer resistance or cow longevity EBVs.

"If we could discover some new super sires along the way, that would be a real bonus," he said.

As a co-operator herd, Wirruna stud has reaped benefits, such as being exposed to some of the breed's best up-and-coming sires and being able to keep their high-quality female offspring. It has also given the Lockes the chance to compare Wirruna calves' performance against those by outside sires in the same environment.

From a breed improvement perspective, Ian hoped his fearless attitude to benchmarking and being open to scrutiny caught on.

"The progeny test program is a rigorous scientific exercise delivering the breed high-quality, well-validated genetic information that is free of emotion and subjective opinion. It is information that will point the breed in the right direction for commercial success," he said.

"Some decisions Hereford producers make are still not related to downstream profitability of animals and, in my mind, producers should try to understand what the profit drivers are and use benchmarking and BREEDPLAN to achieve those goals in their herd."

Room for improvement

Ian said it was important that Herefords, as a breed, continually improved calving ease and early growth rates, without the hangover of high birth weights or large mature cow size.

"I'd like to see fertility and carcase traits improve, and there has been a lot of focus on this in recent years, but I'd also like to see improved muscling and marbling while maintaining positive fat, because of the benefits to fertility, finishing ability and meat shelf life," he said.

Ian encouraged stud and commercial producers to remember that lasting genetic improvement was an investment with a long-term view.

"If you pick only one trait, genetic gain can be achieved quickly, but to try and move a range of economically important traits together is a much slower process," he said.

"But the great thing is that genetic gain is both permanent and cumulative, like compound interest."

Snapshot

Ian and Diney Locke, Holbrook, NSW.

Property: 1,400ha

Enterprise: Hereford stud stock, Prime Line ewes (self-replacing, maternal sheep flock) for prime lamb production

Livestock: 700 Hereford stud cows; 3,500 Prime Line ewes

Pasture: Perennial based phalaris and sub-clover with some rye grass and lucerne; 15% of the area is non-arable native pastures

Soil: Predominately granite based with gravelly hills down to heavy clay flats – naturally acidic.

Rainfall: 708mm

Watch Ian's presentation on genetic selection for economically important traits at this year's MLA Hamilton Meat Profit Day at: **www.mla.com.au/hamiltonmpd**

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Gaining a global perspective

Finding out what drives meat purchasing decisions, dining-out habits and shopping preferences is an important element of MLA's marketing strategies and their collective goal of growing long term demand for Australian beef and lamb.

Consumer research carried out last year was one of the main drivers of the 'True Aussie' global rebranding project. It gave an important base level understanding of Australia's position in each market, prior to a 'deep dive' analysis into consumer and trade perceptions.

MLA Global Marketing General Manager Michael Edmonds said it was important to understand consumer attitudes and behaviours for a multitude of reasons.

"At the top level, it is about understanding what consumers' value the most when they are shopping for meat," he said.

"At a behavioural level, we also want to know about habits regarding the different proteins generally, by asking questions like; 'how often does the average Indonesian eat beef versus chicken? Or 'where does beef sit in consumer perceptions?'

"Then, it is about tracking the reported usage of Australian red meat against others such as local beef, American beef, New Zealand lamb.

"It is important to monitor these attitudes because they are likely to shape future demand. And it allows us to track the health of our country of origin 'brand' in each market, to tailor appropriate marketing strategies."

"Ultimately, the long term goal of MLA's global marketing team is to build awareness and demand for Australian beef and sheepmeat, and by analysing the habits of the end user we can determine how to approach each market with targeted, effective, and appealing campaigns that raise the profile of Australian product overseas," Michael said.

Fact finding

MLA has just completed one of its largest global consumer research projects ever in the second wave of data collection, which this year explored regions previously not studied when the first round of research took place in 2013.

Global marketing had always collected research data from traditional key markets but in 2013 the project was initiated on global scale to analyse and compare consumer attitudes and behaviours in each market from a unified approach. Countries included in 2014 were China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines (new), Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Japan (new), South Korea, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), USA, Canada (new) and Australia.

The same interview questions were asked in each market with survey respondents specifically targeted based on a number of factors predetermined to make up the focus group of respondents, including geographic location, age group, occupation and income bracket, and those who were mainly or equally responsible for their household's grocery shopping and were buyers of meat.

An action plan

Now with two years of data, the research can also be used longitudinally by looking for changes and trends over time and benchmarking Australia's brand status in each market. Michael said this enabled a better understanding of where to target activities, and what attributes about red meat to focus on.

"For instance, it is known that consumers across the globe value Australia's reputation for food safety, so tracking how strongly that perception is holding over time against other competitors is important," he said.

"In markets such as North America and Korea we know to focus on growing awareness of Australian lamb, but in more mature markets like the Middle East and Australia, the onus is on achieving and protecting consumer favouritism.

The lamb consumer of 2025

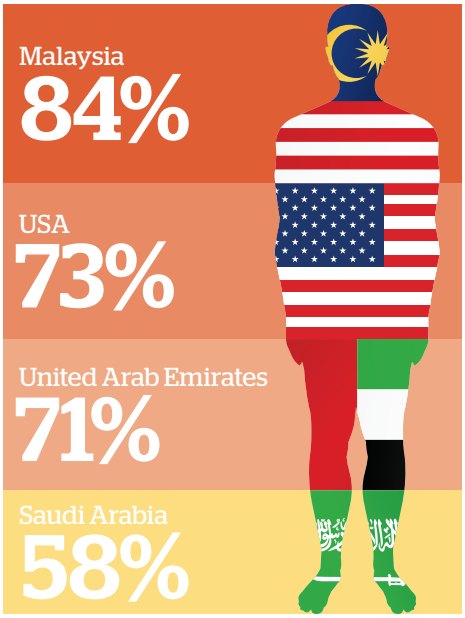
'Who is the lamb consumer of 2025 and what will they look like' was the main focus for Michael Edmonds, MLA's General Manager of Global Marketing, when he presented to 900 attendees at Lambex 2014 in South Australia last month.

Drawing on MLA-funded global consumer research, market intelligence and on-the-ground insights, Michael identified four markets likely to continue growing over the next decade, five consumer trends and how MLA is capitalising on these opportunities, and most importantly, what this means for producers:

Growth markets	Consumer trends	So what?
1. United States 2. Australia 3. Middle East 4. China	1. Connecting with natural foods 2. Connecting with social media 3. Becoming a global village (move to westernisation) 4. Convenient and healthy food 5. Healthy ageing	Producers have every reason to be optimistic about the future for Australian lamb. Maintaining and gaining loyalty of the global consumer hinges on producers remaining focused on quality and productivity.

Listen to Michael Edmonds' presentation at Lambex 2014 at **www.lambex.com.au**

Figure 1 **Prompted awareness of Australian lamb (of surveyed respondents):**



"Some markets value 'food safety' as more important than taste and quality, like China and Indonesia, but others such as Canada and North America value the opposite.

"In the Chinese market, Australian beef occupies a premium position, but in others like Japan, Australia occupies the everyday/family position."

This information is shared with industry, particularly exporters, to increase direct sales and inform more effective marketing campaigns.

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Feedback will cover the results of the 2014 global consumer research in upcoming editions.

Recipe

Add some heat to your winter

The Winter 2014 edition of *ENTICE* magazine has been printed and distributed through major retailers including Woolworths, Aldi, IGA and more than 3,000 butcher shops. The magazine contains six hearty recipes ideal for winter, that encourage the use of a variety of beef and lamb cuts. Entice your tastebuds with this take on the traditional lamb curry from the latest edition.

Indian green lamb curry

Serves: 4

Preparation time: 25 minutes

Cooking time: 85 minutes

Ingredients

1kg lamb forequarter chops, trimmed of fat

½ lemon, juiced

½ cup water

1 bunch coriander, roots, stems and leaves, washed and chopped

5cm ginger, peeled and chopped

6 cloves garlic, peeled

1 long green chilli, deseeded

1 tsp ground turmeric

1 tbsp sunflower oil

1 tsp fennel seeds

1 medium brown onion, sliced

Roast cauliflower, pumpkin and green beans

1 tsp sunflower oil

1 tbsp cumin seeds

½ head cauliflower, broken into florets

2 cups green beans, halved, blanched

600g Kent pumpkin, cut into 2cm wedges

2 cups cooked brown basmati rice, flatbreads and chilli pickles, to serve

Method

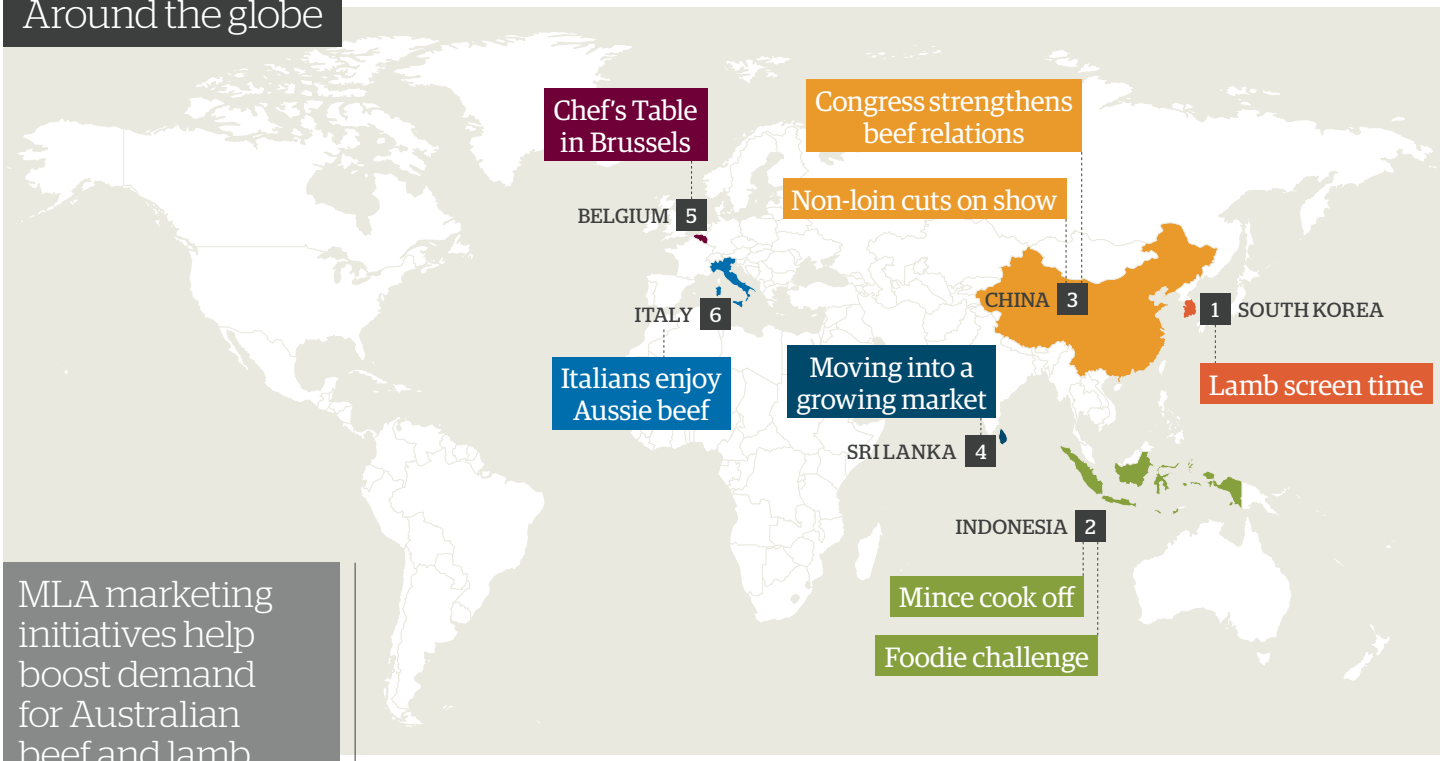
1. Preheat oven to 150°C fan-forced.
2. Place lemon juice, water, coriander, ginger, garlic, chilli and turmeric in a blender. Cover and blend for one minute or until smooth.
3. Pour half the oil into a flameproof casserole dish and place over medium heat. When hot, add lamb and cook for six to eight minutes until browned. Set aside. Pour off rendered lamb fat from pan. Add remaining oil and fennel seeds and then immediately add the onions and stir until golden. Return lamb to pan.
4. Pour contents of blender over lamb and bring to a simmer. Cover with lid and place in oven for one hour to 1 hour 15 minutes or until meat is tender.
5. Toss cauliflower and pumpkin in oil and spread over a baking tray, sprinkle with cumin seeds and roast for 40 minutes or until starting to brown at the edges. Toss with blanched green beans.
6. Serve with rice, flatbreads and chilli pickles.

Tips

1. Try using diced lamb shoulder and lamb chump chops instead.
2. Adjust the type of herbs and spices in your sauce. Try curry powder, ground cumin or ground coriander.
3. Improve the flavour by making the curry the day before.
4. Soak fresh coriander in a bowl of cold water to remove all grit or dirt. Wrap in a clean tea towel and shake free of water before using.

See more at:
www.beefandlamb.com.au

Around the globe



MLA marketing initiatives help boost demand for Australian beef and lamb both at home and in our global marketplace.

1 SOUTH KOREA

Prime time

MLA sponsored a television segment on *SBS Morning Wide* to introduce Australian lamb and its clean and green reputation to Koreans. It was aired to 650,000 Korean households. Two of the program's presenters travelled to Australia and filmed their visit to a Victorian sheep property and a lamb tasting lunch in a Sydney restaurant. The segment featured interviews from the sheep producer, chefs and restaurant diners.

650,000
Korean households reached by Aussie lamb TV segment

2 INDONESIA

Mums learn about mince

Fifty Indonesian women joined a beef cooking class and culinary tour at a resort and restaurant in Puncak, West Java. Run by MLA, the event included a cooking demonstration with Australian beef mince to show its quality and versatility in home cooking. Four dishes, using one base mince recipe, were demonstrated by well-known Indonesian chef Rita Lizani. The class broadened their understanding of mince and its ability to meet nutrition requirements for the whole family.

Competing with Australian beef

MLA partnered with retail group, Farmers Market, to run a live cooking competition in Jakarta targeting home cooks and housewives. Around 50 entrants were challenged to cook beef mince dishes in 45 minutes. Farmers Market supplied the chilled beef and prizes for three winners, and a celebrity chef was on hand to inspire the contestants. The winning dishes included minced beef dutch croquettes, minced beef satay with pineapple sauce and beef dim sim in cauliflower wraps.

3 CHINA

Beef at World Meat Congress

The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the China Meat Association to extend further cooperation and better communication between Australia and China was a highlight when MLA attended the 20th World Meat Congress (WMC) in Beijing.

The WMC attracted more than 600 attendees from 33 countries. A range of

government, industry and agri-food specialists gave presentations, including MLA's Peter Barnard who spoke on 'the role of trade and productivity improvements in sustainably feeding nine billion'. MLA promoted Australian red meat through a trade booth and also sponsored the serving of beef short ribs at the anniversary WMC gala dinner, attended by 500 guests.

500
gala dinner guests sampled Australian beef ribs

Non-loin beef cuts showcased

An importer partnered with MLA to host a Chef's Table in Changsha, south central China, and Xian, north west China, to promote Australian beef. These were attended by 112 five-star hotel chefs, restaurant owners and café chain managers. MLA demonstrated the non-loin cuts of oyster blade and chuck roll. Participants asked many questions about the different beef cuts and defrost technology, gaining knowledge for future sourcing of price-competitive and quality red meat. Seven media representatives attended and the events were covered in local newspapers and online.

4 SRI LANKA

Trade show debut

Sri Lanka is emerging as a significant tourist destination with visitor numbers up 26% in 2013, increasing a further 30% for the first half of 2014 to 1.5 million. To take advantage of the expanding and ever increasing tourism and foodservice market in Sri Lanka, MLA had a trade stand at Hotel Show, Colombo. Recognised as the largest hospitality trade exhibition in South Asia, MLA used the show to feature educational materials on Australia's production systems as well as 'cut by cook method' butchery technique materials. Samples of Australian beef and lamb cuts, cooked as grilled and wet dishes, were handed out. MLA will continue its presence in the region by focusing on the growing foodservice market in the Maldives and sponsoring a chefs' culinary competition in September.

Chef Alan Palmer (right) lives in Sri Lanka and works for MLA in India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

5 BELGIUM

Embassy hosts Chef's Table

Thirty-five Belgian chefs, retailers, distributors and food writers attended a Chef's Table in Brussels hosted by the Australian Embassy. MLA EU/Russia Regional Manager Michael Crowley ran an Australian beef and lamb supply chain workshop for the chefs and MLA provided Australian beef and lamb cuts during the event and at the formal lunch. Six entrees and four main dishes prepared by three well-known chefs were served to the crowd, which included MLA's newly appointed Australian beef and lamb ambassadors from the foodservice and butchery trade.

6 ITALY

Bellissimo grainfed beef

Around 70 foodservice professionals attended a Chef's Table hosted by the Australian Embassy in Rome. The event, run in partnership with a culinary media company, drew high profile chefs from across Italy. MLA provided Australian grainfed beef tenderloin and lamb shank for a formal lunch. MLA EU/Russia Regional Manager Michael Crowley introduced the work of MLA in the region, outlining Australia's dedication to delivering consistent, high quality beef and lamb products. Australian Ambassador to Italy, Mike Rann, addressed the crowd, and the event was filmed to become part of a television program produced as a publicity DVD for the embassy and MLA to use in promotions.

On the ground

Middle East/North Africa

Jamie Ferguson
MLA Regional Manager
Middle East North Africa
E: jferguson@mla.com.au

Australian beef exports to the Middle East almost doubled in 2013, compared to the previous year. By halfway through 2014, exports were on track for a similar volume to last year's 61,230 tonnes.

Lamb exports were also progressing well, in line with the region's growth, while mutton exports were slightly lower in the face of greater competition from other global markets.

One of the growing markets in the Middle East is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is small in a regional and global context with a population of 9.4 million (Saudi Arabia has nearly 30 million people). However, in terms of markets for Australian lamb, it is large. The UAE's hotel and restaurant sector is growing rapidly and represents an opportunity to both seize on and build Australia's red meat reputation with consumers.

The oil boom in 1974 created a very modern group of cities including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah which account for three of the seven emirates that constitute the UAE. While Islamic by culture, the cities are cosmopolitan in nature, which is driving a booming tourist industry, a new world trading hub, a dynamic manufacturing industry and major transport centre with the emergence of Emirates and Etihad Airways.

These changes are also taking food consumption to new levels, in volumes, range and quality. The market enjoys traditional local fat-tailed lamb, but there are also innovative and luxury products readily available, including Australian Wagyu beef.

A soft launch of our Ramadan Halal and 'True Aussie' awareness campaign took place in June, building up with in-store sampling and shopping trolley branding across retailers and in-store advertising continuing over the Ramadan period.

In 2013, the Ramadan period was the epicentre of MLA's multi-channel marketing activities for Australian meat. It was one of our most successful years ever. To ensure continuity and momentum, this year's Ramadan period again took centre stage for MLA's consumer focused retail marketing activities to encourage uptake of Australian beef and lamb at key retailers.

The campaign was driven by advertisements in leading newspapers and was supported by themed point-of-sale material.

Cattle projections

Eyes to the sky: wet season the key to herd rebuilding

The persistent and devastating drought of the past two years was the main influence on forecasted supply in MLA's most recent *2014 Cattle Industry Projections – mid-year update*.

While drought conditions have driven extra cattle to market, the additional impact of poor brandings, higher mortalities and surging live export numbers is expected to constrain supplies in coming years – assuming there is not another failed wet season in Northern Australia for 2014-15.

Season to dictate

Almost record cattle slaughter in 2013 and the first half of 2014 will have a significant impact on future cattle supplies, with the Australian herd estimated to have fallen to 26.7 million head as at 30 June 2014 (see figure 1).

Underpinned by the lower branding rates in the past 12 months, the national cattle herd is likely to continue declining into 2015, when it is anticipated the herd number will fall to a two decade low of 26.1 million head, down a further 2.2% from 2014.

Beyond 2015, assuming average seasonal conditions, the herd is expected to increase slightly (0.6%) in 2016, before eventually rebuilding to 28 million head in 2020.

The rate of the national herd rebuild will be heavily influenced by seasonal conditions. If the northern drought continues for a third consecutive summer, the herd could potentially fall below 26 million head in 2015.

Total turnoff (live cattle exports combined with slaughter) as a percentage of the national herd is likely to reach 35% this year, hitting the highest level since 1979. Provided there are improved seasonal conditions next year, total turnoff is likely to ease back closer to the long-term average of 30%.

Easing of slaughter numbers

Adult cattle slaughter is forecast to ease slightly (0.7% year-on-year) in 2014, to 8.3 million head (see figure 2). In historical terms this is high, considering the adult kill has not exceeded eight million head for two consecutive years since 1978-79.

As has been the case for more than 18 months, the northern drought has fuelled the high slaughter levels and this is likely to continue until at least the final quarter of 2014. This suggests that when there is a turnaround in conditions, northern supply will be tighter than that in the south.

As at May 2014, female slaughter was higher than the corresponding month from the previous year 23 consecutive times, a sequence not seen since 1997-98.

Highlighting the extent of the current herd liquidation, national female slaughter, as a percentage of the national kill is cyclical, typically peaking at 49% in March, before dropping to a low of 43%

in October. Since March 2013, female slaughter, as a percentage of the national kill, crept above the long-term average by one percentage point. This gap progressively widened to a 4.5 percentage point difference in April. With adult cattle slaughter having been high for that period, the high female proportion confirms a high liquidation phase for many cattle producers.

Looking further ahead and taking into account the high slaughter and live export levels and low branding rate, adult cattle slaughter is forecast to fall 900,000 head in 2015 to 7.4 million head.

With fewer cattle coming through the system in the coming year, slaughter is likely to remain steady in 2016, at 7.4 million head, before increasing to 7.9 million head in 2020.

Global demand to remain strong

Underpinned by surging slaughter and high production, Australian beef and veal exports for 2014 are forecast to equal the 2013 record levels of 1.1 million tonnes swt (see figure 3).

Trade with Japan is expected to remain sluggish for the remainder of 2014, while exports to the US, China and Korea are likely to maintain the recent strong momentum.

Domestically, demand is forecast to ease slightly, however this is largely a reflection of the strong international demand and prices, which will pull product away from the Australian market.

Robust demand and record prices through the US market is expected to underpin a sharp rise in volumes – something already witnessed during the first half of 2014. Between January to June 2014, Australian beef exports to the US increased 30%, helping to accommodate the high volume of beef being produced each week as drought turnoff remained high.

For the 2014 calendar year, the US is forecast to be Australia's largest export market for beef, tipped to take around 280,000 tonnes swt.

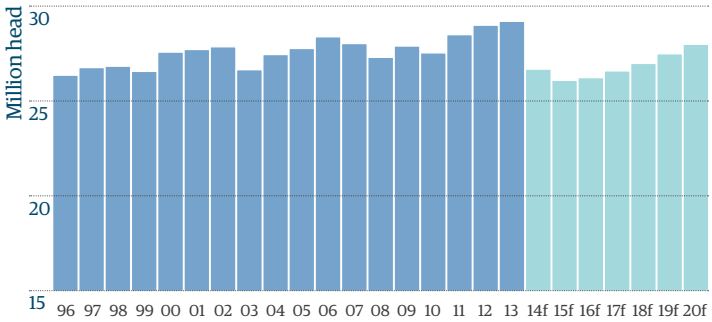
Interestingly, in early 2014, the US market conditions and Australian conditions have been in stark contrast – with the US market registering record prices from the 'gate to the plate' as a shortage of cattle and 60 year low cattle herd impacts available supplies. In contrast, Australia's drought and herd liquidation after a 30-year high cattle herd has constrained prices to producers.

In 2015, demand from China will play a crucial role in determining final volumes to a range of markets. Robust demand from China could continue to place pressure upon volumes to other markets, which was the case for Japan in 2013 – effectively China pulled product away from traditional markets due to the price importers were willing to pay.

While demand from most markets is expected to remain robust in 2015, it will be the projected reduced supply of beef, due to lower cattle slaughter, that will be largely reflected in total volumes. At the time of the projections, the markets best placed to maintain their share of reduced production in 2015 was the US, China and Indonesia.

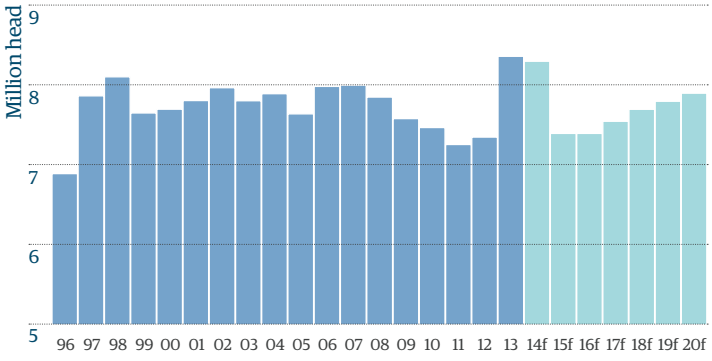
Tim McRae, MLA // E: tmcrae@mla.com.au

Figure 1 Australian cattle herd



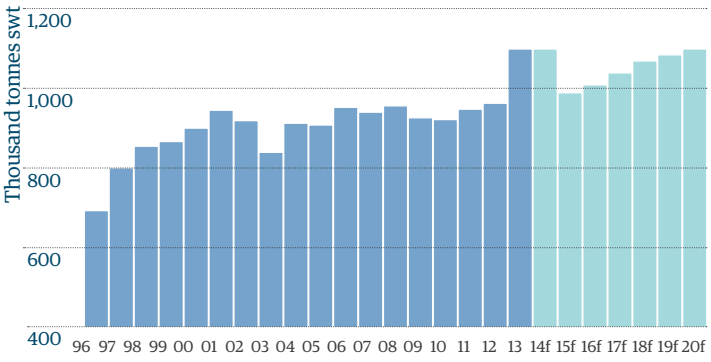
Source: ABS, MLA forecasts *f = forecast*

Figure 2 Australian adult cattle slaughter



Source: ABS, MLA forecasts *f = forecast*

Figure 3 Australian beef and veal exports



Source: ABS, MLA forecasts *f = forecast*

Adelaide//Lambex

Celebrating lamb

Around 900 'lambassadors' – as Sam Kekovich would say – flocked to Lambex in Adelaide in July. Producers, processors, exporters, researchers and agribusinesses joined forces for the two-day celebration of lamb, and came away equipped with strategies to boost ewe fertility, battle wild dogs, embrace new technologies and keep lamb centre-of-plate.

In his keynote address, **Nebraskan producer and 'agvocate' Troy Loos** challenged producers to understand what information was available to curious consumers by Googling 'sheep production', and then take proactive steps to correct any misinformation. He said social media is one tool, but nothing replaces one-on-one interaction with the people who do (or don't) eat lamb.

Professor of Food Marketing at Imperial College, London, David Hughes told producers the only way to win the 'protein battle' was to produce lamb that offered consumers qualities such as taste, tenderness, juiciness, consistency, convenience and a 'wow factor' – all backed by a compelling story of animal welfare and environmental sustainability.

MLA General Manager, Global Marketing Michael Edmonds identified four growing markets for Australian lamb – North America, the Middle East/North Africa, China and Australia – and listed the consumer trends which will shape these markets, such as demand for naturally-sourced products, healthy food for an ageing population and increasing use of social media.

Jason Trompf, Principal of JT Consulting, got producers talking when he explained the economics of lamb survival. He said the main limitation to improved reproduction rates in Australian sheep flocks was 'reproductive wastage' from mid-pregnancy to weaning, especially within three days of birth. Jason urged producers to adopt best practice through programs such as Bred Well Fed Well and Lifetime Ewe Management. **www.lifetimewool.com.au** and **www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au/bred-well-fed-well**

There is nothing like a horse and a dog on stage to capture the attention of a crowd, as **horse trainer Steve Jefferys** demonstrated. He explained that training a horse to perform on stage at the Sydney Opera House was no different to training a new farm employee: the success of a workforce is directly related to its preparation, and this preparation is a series of small, correct steps.

Video presentations from Lambex are available online at www.lambex.com.au

What did producers take away

Ranald, Rachel and Henry Noble, 'Tarbarah', Blackall, Queensland
Rachel: "We got so much out of Lambex. There is a lot to take home and digest. We've always seen ourselves as grass farmers and speakers such as Nigel Kerin really brought home the message of how important it is to manage grass." *Homework:* "To research what tools and programs are available to better measure and budget pastures."

Phil, Ann and Dan Hammat, 'Baderloo', Spalding, SA
Phil: "It was really good to hear about the science of eating quality from people like Alex Ball, to get a clearer idea of where the industry is headed."
Ann: "Lambex has given us advice which will help to support the next generation in our business."
Homework: **Dan:** "We gained a clearer idea of the benefits of electronic identification, so we'll be looking at how to put it into place and what software suits our business."

Upcoming events

Find more events and information at **www.mla.com.au/events**

Nutrition EDGE workshops

This workshop will help you better manage the 2014 dry season and enable you to:

- Better understand the nutritional requirements of your cattle
- Estimate feed value of pasture and related animal production
- Save money on supplementary and drought feeding
- Identify and manage nutritional deficiencies.

When and where:
19–21 August, Emerald, Queensland

Cost:
Single $1760 (discounts available for 2 or 3 from the same business)

Bookings and more information:
Byrony Daniels // T: 07 4983 7459 // E: byrony.daniels@daff.qld.gov.au

BeefEx 2014

BeefEx is the Australian Lot Feeders' Association's pinnacle event, with a program that is designed to encourage big and creative thinking and embrace the odd elephant in the room.

When and where:
7–9 October, Gold Coast, Queensland

Bookings and more information:
1800 177 636 or www.feedlots.com.au

from Lambex 2014?:

→ Todd Noakes, 'Lillydale Station', Yunta, Eddie and James Morgan, 'Outalpa Station', Olary, SA

Todd: "Nigel Kerin's approach to feed budgeting is similar to ours, it reassured us we are on the right track." *Homework:* "I want to make sure we are putting all possible strategies in place so we can make the most of seasonal opportunities to sell dry or trade stock when prices are high."

Eddie: "Jason Trompf had an important message that lamb survivability is about weaning percentage not just lambing percentage – it is important to carry lambs through this early stage of their life. He emphasised the value of scanning ewes to identify single/twin/dry and manage accordingly. It reinforced that the more information you have, the better you can make decisions." *Homework:* "To focus on ewe management to increase lambs to weaning."

James: 'Greg Johnston, at the genetics breakfast, gave an interesting case study of a Kangaroo Island producer who was prepared to make significant changes in his business and basically reversed his fortunes – I think this is an important message, that opportunities do exist for producers who are willing to act on them." *Homework:* "To see how we can use our native grasses and perennial bushes to take advantage of opportunities such as selling early or trading stock."

← Rueben and Amey Solly, 'Yednalue Station' Carrieton, SA

Rueben: "The pre-conference on-farm tour to the Barossa Valley was really interesting – the landscape is so different to our property, so we enjoyed seeing how Landcare groups in this region are managing native grasslands and pastures." *Homework:* "We will look at opportunities to address areas of our land that are not as productive, so we can manage our resources to our best ability."

Amey: "We have been on trips to see the wool supply chain, so this was a really good chance to learn more about the meat side of the industry. The processors who spoke gave me a better perspective about the challenges and opportunities facing producers." *Homework:* "We'll be taking a closer look at the meat side of our business to see how we can maintain sustainability."

→ Albert Graham, 'Jacksonvale Pastoral', Southbrook, Queensland, and Nicola Turner, 'Boorungie Station', Broken Hill, NSW

Albert: "It was really interesting to hear Trent Loos provide a perspective from an international industry with similar concerns to our own. I think his proactive approach to talking to consumers is something the Australian agricultural industry needs to adopt." *Homework:* "I'll be looking at how we can introduce measuring technologies for sheep, such as auto-drafting, into our rural contracting business."

Nicola: "The panel of speakers about wild dog control was really good, it is such a big issue so I think it helped to bring more awareness to the industry about the severity of the problem and that it is an issue which really needs to be addressed." *Homework:* "I'm going to research how technologies such as electronic identification tags and auto-drafting for sheep, cattle and goats can be viable in an extensive enterprise."

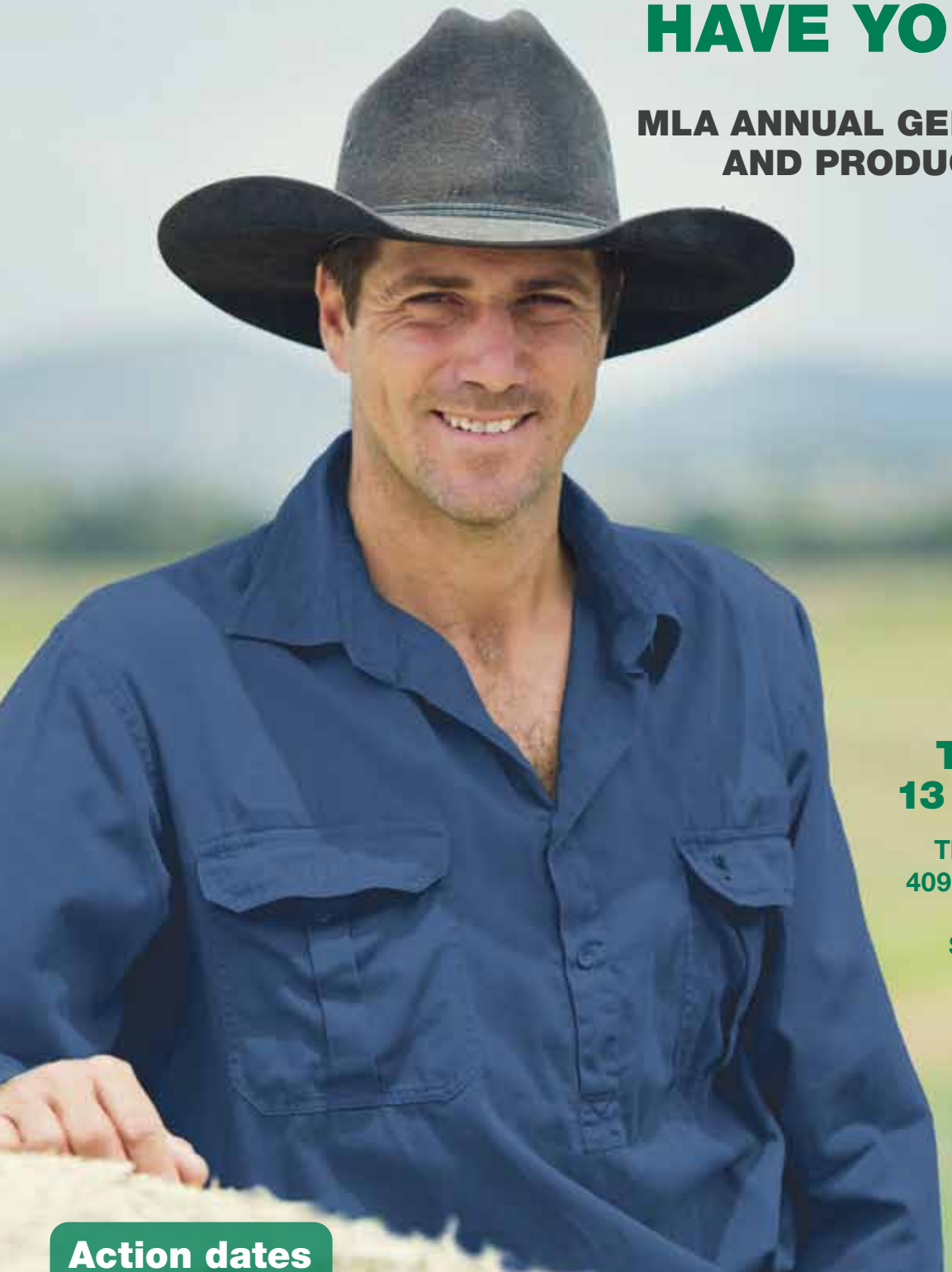
← Esther Glasgow, Woolsthorpe, Victoria, and James Glasgow, Ashmore Station, Kingston, SA

James: "Jason Trompf's talk on ASBVs was interesting, particularly his message that producers need to focus on getting the environment for lamb survival right first, and then use ASBVs as a tool to guide decisions." *Homework:* "I was really surprised to see maps showing how far wild dogs were moving south, and also the disease risks from cats, so we'll be looking at how to better control all feral animals."

Esther: "I got a lot out of the sheep genetics breakfast seminar. Rob Banks, Hamish Chandler and Greg Johnson explained ASBVs from a buyer's perspective which will help breeders identify what traits to select for." *Homework:* "I couldn't believe the spread of wild dogs – it really hit home that it is not just a northern problem. I'm passionate about the sheep industry and I don't want to change, so I'll be looking into how we can protect our business from wild dogs into the future."

MLA IS YOUR COMPANY HAVE YOUR SAY...

MLA ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND PRODUCER FORUM



Thursday
13 November

The Concourse
409 Victoria Avenue
Chatswood
Sydney, NSW

Action dates

2 October Return your levies notice or lodge online to receive your full voting entitlement
Submit your nomination form for the MLA Board Selection Committee
Last day to sign up for MLA membership to participate in the 2014 AGM

7 November	Submit your questions on notice for the AGM at **www.mla.com.au/agm**
11 November	Return your proxy form or submit online by 2.00pm AEDT
13 November	Attend the MLA AGM and producer forum

For more information visit **www.mla.com.au/agm**
or call **1800 675 717**

mla
MEAT & LIVESTOCK AUSTRALIA