DIGIFARM PROJECT: Optiweigh Demonstration Site, Werris Creek

Background

The Digifarm Project is funded through the Australian Government Smarter Farming Partnerships which is run as part of the National Landcare Program. North West Local Land Services and the University of Sydney have teamed up to run a series of demonstration sites across the North West region to showcase the latest in agricultural technology and how it can be adopted into North West Farming Systems.

A component of the project is looking at livestock technologies, specifically in paddock systems for weighing cattle, and how the information collected can be best utilised to provide real time return on investment within local grazing systems.

How does it work?

The Optiweigh system is an easily transportable in-paddock system that accurately measures and records the weight of cattle and performance of the mob over time. It was developed by Bill Mitchell, a grazier from the New England who saw the need to monitor stock weight and daily gain from the paddock within their own grazing enterprise.

For more information on the Optiweigh you can visit their website at https://www.optiweigh.com.au/. A loose lick or molasses based lick block is generally used as an attractant in the unit to encourage and sustain attendance to the unit over time.

We placed the unit in with a mob of 51 cows with calves at foot near Werris Creek, NSW.

One of the objectives of this site was to determine if older cows would attend the unit in a standard commercial cow/calf operation and what value we could gain from having the unit in with them vs having it in the shed until weaning for example.

The cows were moved into a paddock of winter wheat for grazing, our secondary objective for the project was to track performance of the calves on the winter wheat, compared to native grass which they would move onto next.

Will exposure to the Optiweigh unit as a form of novel stimuli as calves, improve attendance when the heifers go on to be breeders and have their own calves at foot?

Pros/cons

During the initial period of introduction, we used a Megamin mineral block as the attractant; these had been provided to the cows in the paddock prior to the Optiweigh going in. The cows were showing no interest in the unit, and naturally the calves were not attending without their mothers so the producer drizzled molasses on the unit and lick block, and moved it closer to a pathway the cattle had created to the water trough in an attempt to increase attendance. Over a period of a month only 10 cows attended.

After consultation with the producer we opted to remove the Megamin mineral block and try a more palatable loose lick comprising 1/3 protein meal, 1/3 limestone and 1/3 salt.

Attendance increased slightly but overall, we found the older cows just weren't interested in attending

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regardless of the attractant used; the calves however did became more inquisitive as they got older with good attendance after weaning.

Farmer/advisor experience using the technology

The combination of feed tests and weights that we were able to collect from the Optiweigh highlighted the need to provide a protein supplement to the cows while grazing both the winter wheat and native pastures to improve utilisation.

Our producer, Mike Lomax, was very persistent with trying to improve attendance rates and monitoring the mob because he could see the potential for the technology within his business.

What's next?

The heifers from this mob have been retained as future breeders, the Optiweigh unit was kept with the heifers from weaning and we will follow them through with the Optiweigh to see if exposure to the unit as a form of novel stimuli as calves improves attendance when they have their own calves at foot.

Our team is very intrigued to see if attendance improves in cows that have been exposed to the unit as calves, and what opportunities this would open for in paddock performance recording and how that could work into decision making for the cow/calf mob.

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