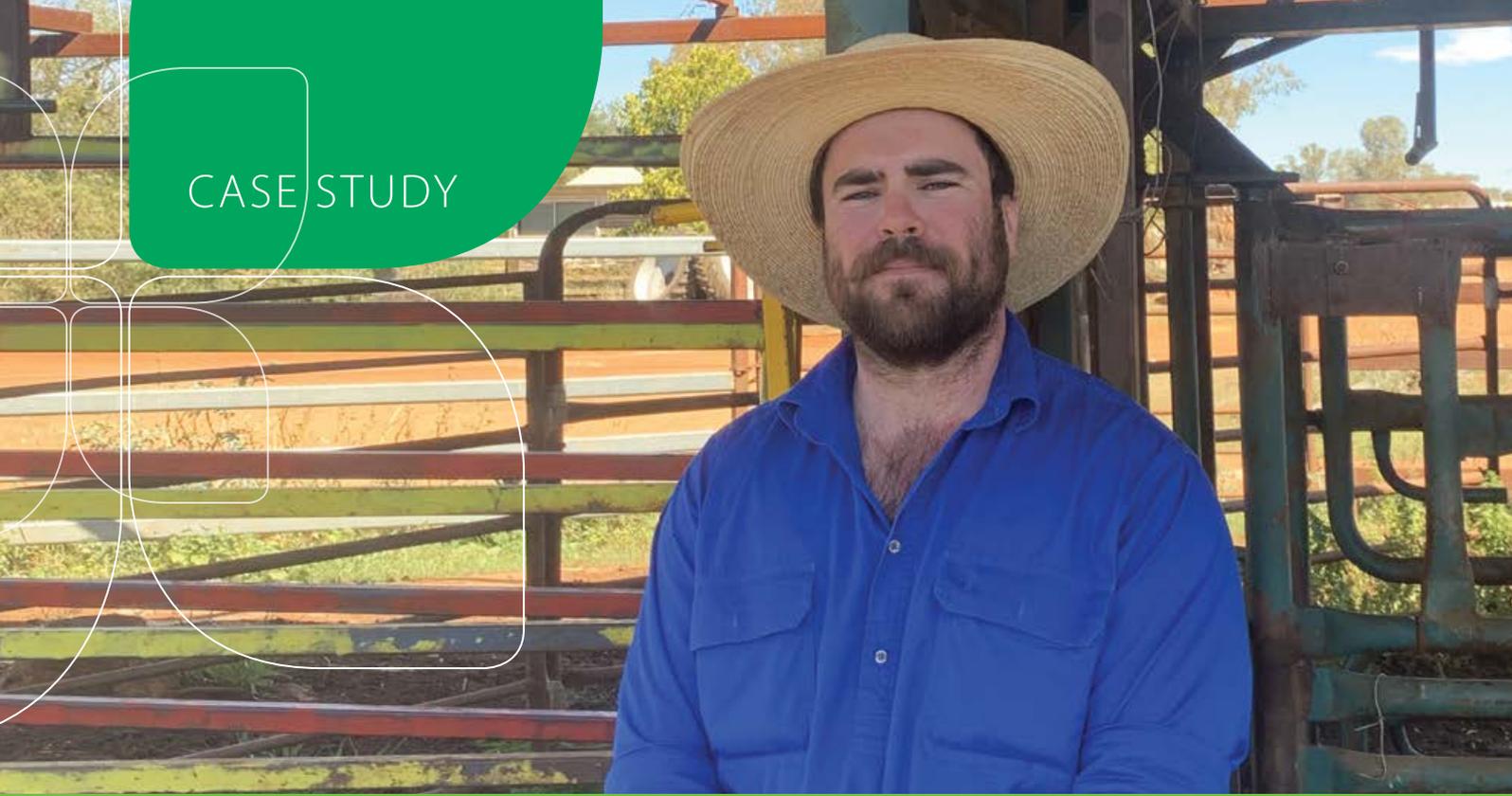


## CASE STUDY



# Early weaning and confinement feeding of calves

## Snapshot

### Producer:

Matt Avendano (pictured)  
'Towri', Boggabri  
20 kms west of Boggabri

### Area: 4,000ha

Mixed farming enterprise,  
beef cattle and cropping



## Background

After several years of below-average rainfall, and with forecasts of continuing drought conditions ahead, Matt Avendano made the difficult decision to reduce his cattle numbers and implement a drought management strategy that involved early weaning and confinement feeding of calves.

Until the recent drought, Matt had previously relied on sub-tropical grasses for his beef cattle operation, with only minimal supplementary feeding required during winter for his breeding cows.

With pasture reserves dwindling, Matt began researching options for maintaining his reduced herd through the drought and developed a plan to wean early and introduce confinement feeding.

## What was involved

To keep the process as practical and as easy to implement as possible, Matt utilised existing resources and infrastructure, ensuring that setting up for confinement feeding was as cost-effective and sustainable as possible.

Matt researched how to manage the welfare of young calves weaned early from their mother. He spoke with other producers who had experience with early weaning and sought out expert advice from veterinarians and animal nutrition specialists.

In normal conditions, calves would usually not be weaned until they reached 250kg, but Matt began separating the young calves from their mother when they reached 100kg in weight.

He split the calves into pens based on body weight and size. Ideally, he would have liked to split the herd further based on gender but did not

have the capability at the time, however he found that this did not have an adverse impact on production.

Matt didn't initially have the infrastructure he needed to run a feedlot system, so he used what was best available to him at the time. He started by using waste-not feeders for hay, feeding grain separately and, supplying cattle with dry lick.

He then converted his waste-not feeders into a feedlot bunker system. He realised that although the original system worked reasonably well, it became much more efficient when he incorporated a feed mixer which made the process much more cost-effective and less labour intensive.

Lack of rumen development in younger calves was a key issue, and Matt had to be more careful with their required dietary needs, creating different rations for different age/weight categories of the calves.

He realised that this could be a stressful time for young calves and his plan involved an extensive vaccination program, ensuring that they were fully protected at the point of weaning when it was most stressful.

## Benefits

Selective reduction in stock numbers in the early stages of drought can greatly reduce costs of feeding livestock over extended periods of time.

Reducing the numbers, and separating calves at a young age, helps preserve the core breeding herd, thereby retaining genetics for the long term benefit of the enterprise.

By early weaning calves, and managing supplementary feeding separately, the requirements for maintenance of cows is substantially reduced, making it a more cost-effective strategy for maintaining the remaining herd.

Reducing numbers helps maintain pasture and soil cover allowing you to protect this valuable resource for the future of the enterprise.

## Summary

Deciding to selectively reduce livestock numbers early and, by implementing strategies such as early weaning and confinement feeding during drought, can be an effective drought management strategy for beef producers.

Not only does it protect the productive resources of the farm such as pastures, soil, and capital as well as preserving the genetics of the herd, most importantly it allows production to recommence after the drought.

## Further information

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## Key learning and advice

It is economically more efficient to wean the calves and manage nutrition separately.

Do your research - seek out reliable advice from knowledgeable sources such as veterinarians and animal nutrition specialists.

Understanding animal welfare and dietary needs for the age of calves being weaned is essential.

A vaccination program is of benefit to the health of young calves experiencing stress during weaning.



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