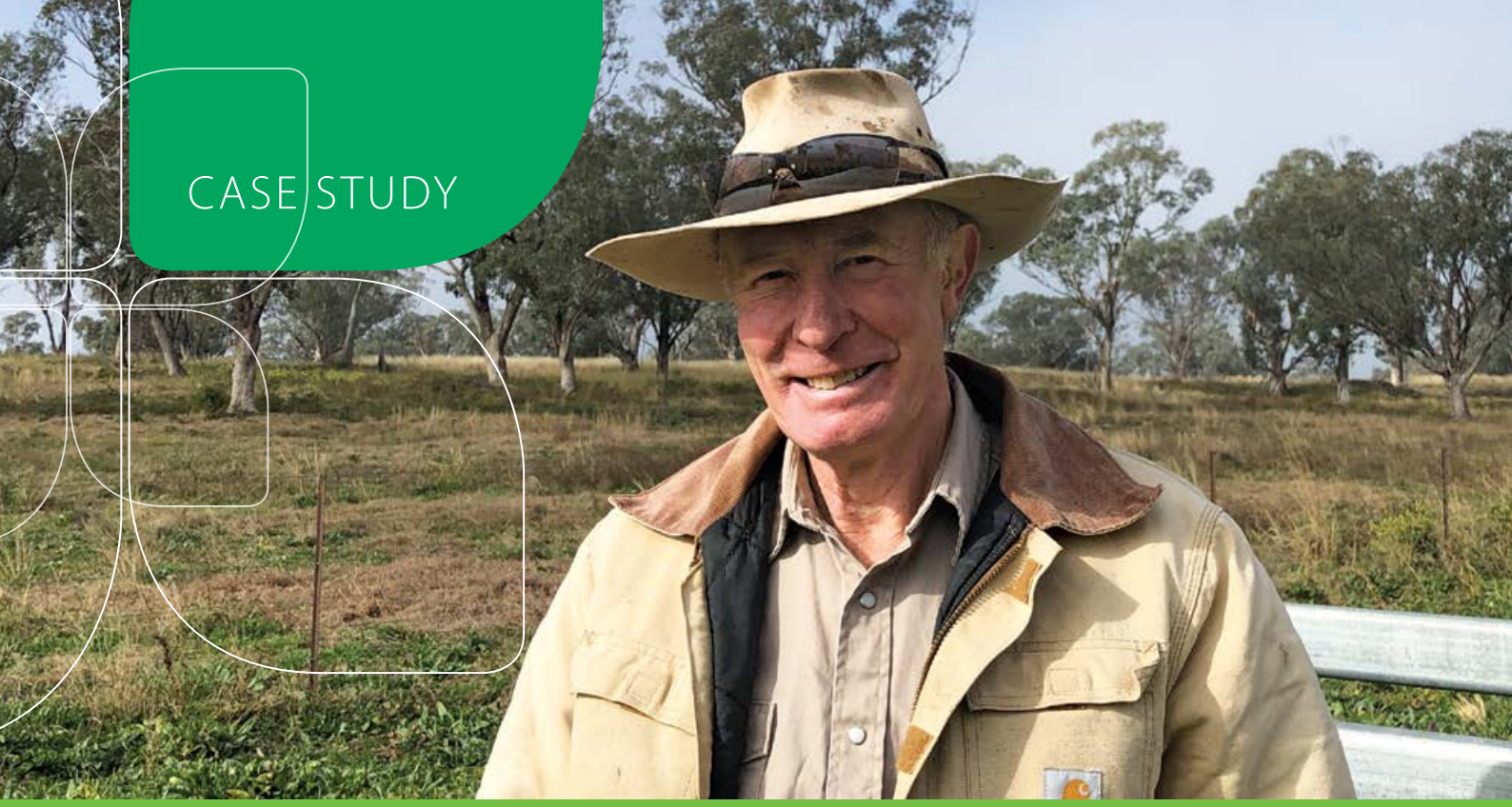
CASE STUDY



Confinement feeding and managing energy intake

Snapshot

Producer:
Mike Lomax (pictured)
'Yandilla', Werris Creek
45kms south of Tamworth

Area: 1,095ha
Beef cattle breeding and fodder cropping

Background

To meet the challenges faced by his beef cattle enterprise during the recent drought, Mike Lomax developed a drought management strategy that involved the setting up of a confinement feeding area and focussed on meeting the essential energy requirements of his breeding cows.

In normal conditions, Mike runs 360 breeding cows, but after three years of drought, he had selectively reduced this number down to around 100 of his core breeding herd. For the last 12 months of the drought, Mike set up a confinement feeding area for his remaining cows, with most in various stages of pregnancy or lactation with calves at foot.

What was involved

Mike significantly reduced his stock numbers as the drought progressed. He also introduced an early weaning program, weaning calves at four months rather than his usual eight months of age to give the remaining cows the best chance at maintaining their condition. He experimented and tried different types of fodder options including rice, sorghum and corn stubble but realised that the nutritional value of these types of fodder was not high enough in quality to sustain his remaining cow herd in good condition.

Mike carefully considered where to locate the confinement feeding area, taking into account whether the area was well-drained, had sufficient shade and whether it made good use of existing resources and infrastructure.

Stock were confined to small paddocks of approximately one hectare which were located close to existing amenities and had water troughs already available. Mike fenced the area using materials he already had on hand, which helped reduce the initial costs of setting up.

The most expensive outlay was for new feeders which he had built. Each feeder was set up to feed 30 animals, and he installed two in each confinement area. He fed cattle a combination of cottonseed and hay which were sourced off-farm. He carefully analysed the quality of hay that he obtained with feed energy values assessed for proteins, megajoules(MJ) and metabolisable energy(ME) per kilogram of dry matter.

Mike realised that he was much better off with quality feed rather than quantity and found that oaten hay sourced from Victoria during this period was best with an ME of about 11.

Understanding what energy the cow requires during the cycle from dry cow to fully lactating cow with calf at foot was a key component of Mike's strategy. He carefully analysed and measured rations, adjusting accordingly throughout the various stages of pregnancy, ensuring the cows were getting what they needed at the right time.

Benefits

The placement of confinement areas close to existing amenities, such as feed sheds, makes it much less time consuming to feed cattle. Adapting and using existing infrastructure and resources where possible can help reduce costs.

Confining stock to small areas for feeding during drought helps reduce pasture and soil degradation. Stock do not have to expend energy walking around the paddock looking for food or water, which helps reduce the amount of feed required. Stock health can also be easily monitored more easily in confined areas.

Feeders can significantly reduce wastage levels, making the operation more cost-effective. By analysing the quality of feed and measuring ration components, you can target the specific energy levels required by cows at different stages of pregnancy and after calving.

Not only can the confinement area be used for drought feeding, but it also has the potential to be used in the future for isolating heifers when they are calving or for weaning calves.

Summary

Fully understanding how to best meet the energy requirements of livestock, particularly breeding cows, during dry times is crucial to implementing an effective drought management strategy.

Finding the most cost-effective approach to manage confinement feeding helps maintain core breeding stock, preserving the genetics of the herd and allowing production to recommence after the drought.

Further information

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Key learning and advice

You can't manage what you don't measure - it is important to assess what energy values are contained in your ration and fully understand what energy requirements livestock have, particularly at different stages of pregnancy for cows.

Quality of feed is better than quantity.

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

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