

Reputation the reward for quality breeding

Story courtesy Stephen Burns, The Land 2015

The genetic capability of his Angus stock continues to excite Hazeldean principal Jim Litchfield, Cooma.

“We enjoy what we do and enjoy the breeding. I find the whole genetic thing fascinating...the genetic potential of our stock is almost unlimited. Compared with the chicken and pork industries, the pastoral industry has a long way to go to achieve the sort of change those two breeds have reached. And that is what makes my job challenging and interesting.”

IN the 1980's, Mr. Litchfield said they reflected on 20 years of performance recording, selecting for growth and weight, and realised they had started to run into calving trouble.

“So we started recording birth weights and any female we had to help or didn't go back in calf again at three years old was sold.” It took about 10 years to achieve the desired results.

“For a long time we didn't seem to be going anywhere,” he said.

“It was a period of transition and we dropped our emphasis on growth to maximise our attention on reproduction and calving ease”.

“Then we quite suddenly saw a big improvement and once that was achieved we could return our focus to growth and carcase while still improving reproduction. The focus on having a live calf and high fertility in the females is explained by Mr. Litchfield's determination to maintain the profitability of the business.

“If you do the sums on high growth bulls who lose some calves compared with a low growth bull whose calves all survive, the advantage is clearly in having live calves,” he said.

“We have been big on performance, but selecting purely on low birthweights can also lead to poor calving genetics.”

Mr. Litchfield said he had a responsibility as a seedstock producer to sort out the calving problem, and started by using bulls with low birthweight followed by progressively higher birthweight bulls.

“Thirty years ago I wouldn't have thought a two-year old maiden heifer would give birth to a 45 kg calf without assistance, but they can.”

“Because we have been here for a long time that helps with the perception of our stock and it certainly helps with the marketing of our stock.”

His father James Litchfield agrees. “ We have been here for 5 generations and it is an accumulative thing of breeding good stock,” he said.

“Breeding for productivity, not just for visual appeal.”

James noted the changes in the Hazeldean-type through the years and said they appeared to be performing better than ever.

“They are longer bodied, with more muscle,” he said.

“And they are more resilient in times of drought, because of increased conversion of available feed.”

The Hazeldean stock were fed a urea supplement to help them to convert the low-quality feed, but James also attributes the survivability to the mothering ability of their cows.

“Obviously they are the ones who are putting everything into their calves, and perhaps we should be measuring that trait,” he mused.

Jim Litchfield looks to the northern cattle country as an avenue of expansion for Hazeldean.

“We see that as a growth area...droughts notwithstanding,” he said.

“There are fertility problems in many herds across the top and we see an infusion of Angus blood to be of value.

“With their slick coats and heat and parasite tolerance, our Senegus bulls will add to the northern beef herd”