

Case Study: Black coats and hybrid vigour

Selecting for on-farm productivity and market flexibility

For Bruce and Libby Creek, managers of Hillcrest Pastoral Company, marketing flexibility and achieving high on-farm productivity is the major focus

Hillcrest is primarily a beef breeding operation in the Lucindale district of South Australia owned by Hugh and Clare Bainger. The operation is run on 5200Ha across five properties and produces around 2500 calves annually. In addition to the cattle, a Merino ewe/cross bred lamb enterprise is also run.

The majority of steers are finished off grass to MSA markets, sold to feedlots, or carried through to EU markets.

By growing steers out to heavier weights they are able to better utilise spring pasture compared with traditionally selling the majority of stock into weaner markets. For example, in 2009 steers at 15-16 months and 430-435kg had an average daily gain of 2.2kg on spring pasture over a 53 day grazing trial.

Bruce targets selling steers at approximately 18 months old into grass finished markets rather than carrying them through for an extra summer and autumn. In 2011 85% of steers will be successfully finished off grass compared with 25% in 2007.

Breeding and selection

The cow herd is self-replacing and has an Angus/Poll Hereford/Shorthorn female base.

“Currently we mainly use Angus bulls as we are aiming to get a black coat, and once we achieve that we will look to use Poll Hereford and Shorthorn bulls for hybrid vigour,” Bruce said.

In addition, Charolais and Simmental sires are also strategically used as terminal sires.

Bruce and Libby have set themselves the target of reaching an “even, black coated cow herd, with positive fat EBVs, capacity and structural soundness.” They perceive that the full black coat allows market

flexibility with live weight premiums up to 20c/kg and access to premium end markets. Overall, the breeding program is designed to generate an easy doing herd that can handle tougher conditions and remain fertile.

Bruce and Libby come from a seedstock background, and so are well versed in running breeding programs.

“Selection of suitable bulls has been critical in progress to the Hillcrest herd,” Bruce said. “We place a lot of emphasis on structural correctness, temperament, muscling and softness.”

BREEDPLAN information is also an important part of bull selection at Hillcrest.

Only Angus sires with positive fat (Rump and Rib EBV), above average EMA and at least breed average IMF EBV are selected.

In addition, bulls are also selected to be at least breed average birth weight, above average growth, and only moderate Milk EBV.

Performance on the farm

Steers are now turned off earlier at the desired weights and are consistently hitting market specifications for fat and muscling.

“The selection program has been very encouraging, we reach premium prices with a larger portion of steers produced,” Bruce said.

Bruce and Libby say they have maximum flexibility in marketing options.

“By selecting larger birth weight bulls to use over the heifers, we have increased the capacity of these calves and are now retaining heifer progeny as replacements to enhance genetic gain,” Bruce said.

“We have also seen improvement in the pregnancy rates in the younger lines of females where continual selection for positive fat and moderate milk has ensured that they can return to oestrus



Hillcrest aims to breed an even black coated cow herd

Hillcrest Pastoral Company, Bruce and Libby Creek

Location: Lucindale, South Australia

Property Size: 5200 Ha clay over limestone

Average annual rainfall: 500mm

Growing season: typically 4.5 months July to mid November

Primary target market: 500-600kg steers sold to MSA and EU markets or feedlots

Primary calving month(s): April / May

quickly even during difficult feed periods.”

Hillcrest joins heifers at 300kg plus and has an average heifer calving rate of 85% with cow calving rate ranging from 92-96%. “Any heifer or cow that fails to calve is culled, there are no second chances,” Bruce said.

Living near the Struan Research Centre has allowed Bruce and Libby to follow results from the Beef CRC’s Maternal Productivity Project.

“The results of the CRC maternal productivity trial proved exactly what we believed in practice,” Bruce said. “While we were chasing better muscling along with positive fat, we had been told these two traits could be antagonistic. This trial proved that not to be the case. It also proved that positive fat does help ensure females return to oestrus easier during tough periods.”

Hillcrest Pastoral Company has supported and followed southern beef research and development for many years. Bruce and Libby are MLA More Beef from Pastures Producer Advocates.