

Breeding Cows and Beef

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February 2010

Recommendations for breeding cow management when integrating sheep and beef into profitable systems has been around for many years. Strange then that the only part of the message that seems to have got through involves the feed clean-up role to enhance sheep production. This has led to “integration” or combining beef cows in with sheep at times when feed is short and results in severe underfeeding of the cow.

It should be no surprise that sheep and beef not only graze in different ways, but that they also graze to different pasture base levels. Sheep can harvest maintenance levels of feed down to 500 kgDM/ha. The level for beef cows is more 700-800kgDM/ha. This means that when the two species are combined and compete on a daily basis, the time taken to graze each paddock becomes critical. Sheep can happily continue grazing from 800 down to 500 over a period of some days (or weeks depending on mob and paddock size) while breeding cows reduce bodyweight. This may be an acceptable result provided the process is monitored. Cow body condition must be very good to begin with and the cow must have access to better feed prior to and post-calving.

Too often however, stock are rotated on the basis of time between shifts rather than when pasture levels fall below maintenance levels. If farm stock numbers (feed demand) are too high, adjust them through sale or (for unusual short term deficits) increase feed supply through supplements.

Many systems now have optimistic stocking rates – or more correctly, feed demand compared to feed supply. This is probably a combination of less fertiliser application and pressure to “produce more” brought on by financial stress.

Breeding cows are seen as the safety valve for this overstocking and when they are combined with sheep over winter and lambing, bear the

brunt of any underfeeding. This in turn has led to a general lack in performance in terms of in-calf rates, longevity and weaning weights for the breeding cow with a consequent decrease in “profitability” and herd number over the past 15 years. It is now quite difficult to find breeding herds that are managed in a knowledgeable way to enhance both sheep and beef profitability, simple as this management may be.

Cows can be combined with ewes but only when a feed surplus is looming and management decides to use this simple option rather than shuffling ewes. Separate systems which maximize the attributes of the ewe and the cow are not difficult to manage and result in much greater returns from improved calving rates, weaning weights and lamb slaughter returns. Calving rates of 95%+ with heifers mated at 14 months to calve at 2 years are manageable provided the recommended feeding levels are followed.

In turn, such management allows pastures to respond better and provides a better balance of species (especially clover content) that can be used to advantage for finishing stock.

It seems odd to see growing beef animals in with ewes (whose lambs have been weaned) when the best financial results are achieved from better live-weight gain (LWG). But here too some reflection on what is really happening needs to be understood. To increase the LWG obviously requires a higher intake. This higher intake means that fewer animals can be fed from the same feed supply. If the system already has a higher feed demand than that grown, some extra feed must be introduced to meet the higher demand from faster LWG stock.

You do not get something for nothing despite the best intentions to achieve higher performance. Growing crops takes on the one hand (paddock out of production for crop growth and pasture renewal) and pays back on the other (a chunk of feed at a more appropriate time?). The economics in today’s world however suggest that unless some very cheap, well grown and utilised crops of high quality can be grown for a special premium product, it really is better to reduce stocking rate if you want to increase per animal feeding.

This means over a longer time period that the advantages of faster LWG need to be weighed against the reduced number of stock that will be finished. Some farms may find store stock a more profitable venture for example as more cows can be run to sell more progeny as lighter stores. This may fit the pasture growth pattern better.

Although there is a gain in efficiency with higher LWG (total maintenance is decreased for each kg LWG achieved plus reduced time for stock on the farm), this has to be weighed against the reduction in number. Not an easy calculation to make and one that has been largely ignored by most in the pastoral industry – sheep, beef and even increased milk production/cow in dairy. Hope rather than analysis seems to loom larger with many.

Beef cows are a huge asset to any system. They improve overall pasture use, quality and feed flow and provide a winter buffer if managed to gain weight as the summer feed surplus is turned into profit rather than wasted. They will make a profit out of feed that ewes and lambs cannot. They provide a drought safety valve to reduce stock numbers if sold a year early as younger stores, effectively selling 2 years progeny in one – but be wary of tax and income gap implications next year. They are less work than ewes and lambs and work well with integrated worm prevention strategies.

Yet much of this potential is being squandered because of misunderstanding (or is it ignorance of) the basic rules of animal production and production economics. Both are required. The key is to understand the fundamental requirement to equate feed demand and supply as closely as possible. The breeding cow is well suited for this role and will return high profits provided the herd is not used to cover feed shortages brought on by deficiencies in management.