

Early weaning improves breeder performance in north-western Queensland

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Plate 1. Early weaned calves less than 150 kg supplemented with cottonseed meal.

The highly seasonal rainfall in north-western Queensland is responsible for an annual period of decline in pasture quality and quantity in low fertile areas during winter. Drought conditions prevail on an annual basis from April/May to October/November. This period of poor nutrition is reflected in low breeder fertility, poor growth rates, high breeder death rates and low female cattle sales. Poor nutrition during lactation tends to suppress reproduction of

Brahman and Brahman crossbred breeders. This condition is known as lactation anoestrus. British breed cattle can often die. Breeder performance can be improved by improving breeder body condition through weaning.

Traditionally, the practice in breeder management in north-western Queensland has been to wean calves to six to 10 months of age. Recently, weaning calves, at three to five months (100 to 150 kg), at the start of the dry



Plate 2. Early weaned non-lactating breeders maintain good body condition throughout the dry season.

season in April/May, and the peak of the dry season in August/September, has been recommended by beef cattle husbandry officers to overcome this period of nutritional stress in breeders. This strategy has been adopted by Evan Acton, who owns and manages a forest-downs country block at 'Millungera Station', Julia Creek. He sees it as a way to remove the lactation stress from his breeder herd, to increase conception rates at the first muster and to increase breeder survival at the second muster. Lower breeder death rates and the culling of sub-fertile and cast for age breeders increases his net property income. Further, the increased weaning rates allow him to transfer more weaner steers to his family's properties in the brigalow country for fattening as Japanese ox.

The benefits of weaning calves down to three months at a minimum of two musters a year are: improved breeder condition, reduced breeder death rates, reduced drought stress, improved branding rates, increased cull female sales and hence increased net property income.

However, there is a cost to an early weaning management strategy. Early weaned calves must be fed a high quality supplement and sound husbandry practices must be employed for three to four months post-weaning to ensure the growth and survival of these young weaners. Evan Acton feeds these early weaned calves cottonseed meal at the rate of 0.5 kg/head/day twice weekly to ensure a daily liveweight gain of 200 g/day until the calves reach 150 kg liveweight, at which time they are depastured with the older weaners. For the initial 10 to 14 day period of weaner education, these calves are fed good quality Flinders grass hay at the rate of 1 kg/head/day, after which they are placed in a weaner paddock and further supplemented with cottonseed meal.

The benefits of an early weaning management strategy far outweigh the costs.