

The RDE&A for the northern beef industry – feast or famine.

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Introduction

Are we in the ‘best days’ for DAF Beef Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) or do you yearn for the good old days ... the golden era? A difficult question, which really depends on ones’ career path and experiences. Yet, I have a hypothesis that there have been three distinct phases of Beef RD&E in the Department over the last 40 or so years. This hypothesis is from a research manager’s perspective where I have questioned senior departmental colleagues, reviewed various grey literature, and from my own experiences in DAF since 2005 and in the Northern Territory Department since 1993.

Why is it important? Because culture, teamwork and an appropriate level of funding shape the quantity and quality of the workforce. This results in a steady flow of meaningful projects that make an impact to industry profitability and government priorities. Translating into innovation and professional papers that underpin staff training and personal development opportunities.

Discussion

My sense is that there was a ‘golden era’ of DAF Beef RD&E in the 1970s/1980s to around the late-1990s – Feast. In these times Government supported Agricultural Science had a high degree of prominence and associated RD&E was sustained, in part, by productivity and regional economic development and the National Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (or BTEC). From the late-1990s to about 2015 a leaner and disruptive time came on the back of New Public Management – Famine. From 2015, Beef RD&E activity has picked up once more – Feast. However, multiple re-organisations make it difficult to compare like for like over time. For example, currently DAF has 2146 employees, compared to a department that was all-encompassing with 6091 staff in the early 1990s.

Although more than 30 years apart, there are similarities between the two ‘Feast’ phases. Including longer-term investment by Government in Beef RD&E (e.g. 5-10+ years), through major programs such as the Queensland Alliance for Agriculture and Food Innovation (QAAFI), Reef Grazing Extension, and Drought and Climate Adaptability; combined with long-term investment by industry through Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and the MLA Donor Company.

What is different today from yesteryear is that there are (i) more women conducting Beef RD&E (in DAF), (ii) collaboration is king – where workforce skills are sourced from multiple organisations, (iii) competitive project grant processes are prevalent (iv) generally have smaller more integrated teams, and (v) agriculture is aided by modern communications and advanced technologies. Certainly the Digital Age will foster discovery and create efficiencies on-farm in the years to come (Langridge *et al.*, 2014; Torok and Holper, 2017), yet in contemporary times we still rely on the basic RD&E undertaken in the ‘golden age’ for driving innovation. What will we rely on in 30 years’ time?

References

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