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Warialda grass gains weight

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MAYNE EVENT: Tropical grass has become the cornerstone of Ben Mayne's on-property pasture program at Doongarra, Warialda, NSW.

A PRAGMATIC switch to tropical pasture production is generating consistent and measurable results for Warialda stud breeder Ben Mayne.

Mr Mayne, who runs Texas Angus stud with wife Wendy at Doongarra, just south of the Queensland border, says the move away from native pasture feeding has created a leaner operation on the business side, while assisting to produce a thicker, more robust article at a lower cost of production for his commercial clients.

"Traditionally we always had land set aside for winter and summer crop production to grow out and condition our bulls for sale and prepare females for breeding," he said. "But with the cost of production of the cropping country more than doubling and still rising, and the fallow country placing additional pressure on the rest of the property, we saw the need to change management practices."

Five years ago they saw how much production could come from subtropical grass on a neighbouring property's paddock, providing the key to a more intensive pasture management program that's pumping more energy into their cattle off less area while fattening their business bottom line.

Since moving towards a tropical grass program, the Maynes have realised a suite of benefits, including:

- More winter grass to maintain breeding cows and heifers over the colder months, saving the cost of fodder and agistment, and removing the extremes of feed variability due to seasonal conditions, boosting fertility and reproductive capacity.
- Extending the condition and working life of their sale bulls, which are prepared and grown out on tropical grasses to match the rigours of commercial reality.
- Improving the property's natural environment, dramatically increasing ground cover and adding carbon to the soil. Water retention has been improved and erosion problems addressed.

From that first inkling of the potential of subtropical grass in 2005, production has flourished, with 607ha in production this year and another 120ha programmed for planting in the coming summer. The Maynes' ultimate aim is to have about 1012ha under subtropical grass.

"The hardest part with tropical grass is the initial cost and the time it takes to establish a new paddock," Mr Mayne said.

"Once you pass this stage, the benefits start adding up in front of you. The first

We estimate our carrying capacity has increased 2.5 times.

benefit we saw was the increase in production, in terms of how much feed you can grow and stocking rates.

"We estimate our carrying capacity has increased two-and-a-half times in comparison to the native grass country.

"The next huge benefit we realised quite quickly was closing the winter feed gap both in late autumn and early spring.

"In comparison to the native country, the tropical grasses grow a lot later into the autumn and really take off once it starts warming up, depending on available moisture.

"The frost period is the only time where the grass stays dormant. Closing the winter feed gap has without a doubt been one of our biggest cost savings."

The success of the subtropical grass program has downsized summer crop production of forage sorghum and cow peas at Doongarra because Mr Mayne believes the tropical grass can perform to a similar level once their management prac-

tises are further refined to maximise pasture vigour and performance. Their winter crop program is also in line for cut-backs.

"There is always going to be a place for both summer and winter crop production here at Texas Angus, but the tropical grasses have taken a lot of pressure away," Mr Mayne said.

"Our costs show that grass comes well under half on the country sown to summer crops on a year-to-year basis. Our bulls can also be on pasture as soon as possible, without having to wait for the winter oats to kick in. Providing it is not completely dry and we haven't had early frost, the grass is still green and the cattle can come off the grass and straight onto oats, reducing our level of supplementary feeding considerably."

In the foliage cycle of the pasture, which can be controlled by management, Mr Mayne's bulls had a daily weight gain of about 1.2 to 1.5kg/day.

As the quality of the pasture reduces when it reaches reproductive stage, the bulls achieve about 0.6 to 0.8kg/day, which can vary according to the season.

"The art of tropical grass grazing is learning how to utilise your pasture to get the most out of it," he said. "The boys at Heritage Seeds have been very good in guiding us on how to achieve this."

Mr Mayne said the assistance he had received from his local Heritage Seeds representatives had been high on

expertise and practical advice, helping him and Wendy to establish the custom blend – made up of an equal four-quarter mix of premier

digit, Gatton panic, Katambora Rhodes grass and bambatsi panic – and to understand feed utilisation for optimum efficiency.

Heritage Seeds state (NSW) manager, Adrian Dridan, Gunnedah, said tropical pasture uptake had increased rapidly during recent years.

"Ten years ago, people were dabbling with them, but they were considered eccentric," he said.

Mr Dridan said tropical pastures were two to three times more productive than the natives, producing 10 to 12 tonnes of dry matter a hectare a season, and in some cases 140kg/ha/day.

"If you get a cracking season, you might be up to 14t or 16t," he said.

"That's an awful lot of dry matter – it's like buying a couple of paddocks from next door."

Mr Mayne said he couldn't agree more with the analogy.

"At weaning time we put 300 cows and progeny on 72ha of tropical grass for six weeks and there was still feed left," he said. "To do that on the native country we would have needed three times the area and they still wouldn't have put on the condition they did on the tropical grass."

"That period of time allowed the native country to grass up, fully ready for the cows after they came off the tropical grasses – something we weren't able to achieve prior to 2005."

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