



Charters Towers beef producer Michael Lyons speaking at the University of Queensland Environmental Forum.

New generation seeks positive s

AT 36 years of age, Michael Lyons may represent the lead of a new generation of beef producers who can't remember a time when environmental management was not a front-of-mind issue.

For much of the past two decades his family's property, Wambiana, south of Charters Towers, has been the venue for long-term grazing trials showcasing the accumulated effects of different stocking strategies and spelling on animal production, land condition

and profitability.

Mr Lyons' acute interest in land and environmental management recently saw him invited to participate in an environment debate in Brisbane.

Titled "Can Red Meat Be Green?" the debate was held at the University of Queensland as part of MLA's community communications program.

High school and university students and the general public heard from and asked questions of

the environmentalists.

They included Professor Tim Flannery, Corey Watts from the Climate Institute and Arron Wood, 2006 UN environment award winner.

Mr Lyons brought a grassroots producer perspective to the forum panel, arguing that cattle can be part of the solution to environmental management, and that if left unmanaged, large areas of land currently used by the pastoral industry could develop

into a feral animal, exotic weed and fire threat of monumental proportions.

He said that within his own family enterprise, younger cattle turnover, and running a greater proportion of younger stock that were more efficient feed converters, had helped contribute to methane reduction.

Mr Lyons also told the audience that it was "hard to be green when in the red", meaning there needed to be a marriage

Push for productivity

Meat and Livestock Australia chairman Don Heatley says while the nation's beef industry faces a multitude of challenges on an almost daily basis, productivity improvement and market access remained two of the central pillars in that process.

"In this country we need about two percent productivity improvement every year, just to stand still," he told a recent gathering of international beef economists in Brisbane.

"As an industry, we just have to address the productivity issue on an almost daily basis. Without a strong and consistent industry-wide approach to productivity improvement, we will fall behind in our international competitiveness - there is absolutely no doubt about that."

Mr Heatley said in a similar fashion as to what was happening in Brazil, the Australian beef herd was shifting north, driven largely through the potential to gain economies of scale and consequent greater productivity by moving into more extensive areas. In many cases these regions still offered scope for further development.

"At the same time, general productivity in northern regions has to continue to improve," he told the visiting economists. As an example, he said Indicus-based herds of Northern Australia could make a major jump in productivity simply through using available tools to drive further genetic improvement.

Being export dependent, market access is the blood in our veins.

Another critical factor that would drive the northern industry's fortunes was market access.

"As a nation, being 65 percent export market-dependent, market access is the blood in our veins. If we are unable to secure reasonable access, then we can quickly get into trouble," he said.

"Building blocks and systems that have been created within the Australian beef industry like NLIS, MSA and LPA have helped us achieve and maintain unparalleled market access across the world."

One of the regional market access challenges facing cattle producers in Northern Australia at present was the 350kg weight limit for cattle exported to Indonesia, as well as the Indonesian Government's recent announcement that it will cap cattle imports at 452,000 head this year.

To address this issue Mr Heatley said a number of activities had been undertaken by both the Australian and Indonesian industries, who are concerned about the



MLA chairman Don Heatley will outline some of the initiatives supporting the northern beef industry during an address at the Charters Towers Meat Profit Day.

impact of the cap on the northern cattle industry as well as the impact that tightened supply would have on Indonesian cattle producers and beef consumers.

The Indonesian industry is seeking an increase in cattle import permits from its government to ensure it will be able to meet demand for beef from local

consumers. Simultaneously, the Australian industry is working with the Indonesian industry to ensure Australia is viewed positively in Indonesia.

While the beef industry generally was under pressure from rising input costs, a recent study of northern beef businesses revealed there is a lot of variation in

performance, Mr Heatley said. "The top 20pc of Queensland producers averaged an 8.5pc/year return on asset, while the overall average was just 2.6pc."

MLA programs for northern beef focused on genetic improvements, optimising pasture use as well as productivity and sustainability in grazing and feeding systems.



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Marrying profitability and sustainability

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MLA members - \$20
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Dinner - \$20

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Solutions

Risk management path to sustainability

between profitability and sustainability. As the Wambiana trial had demonstrated it was often possible to make more money, more consistently, while running fewer cattle. "In our case we've tried to align our business to work more with nature," Mr Lyons said.

"As soon as you try to work against it, it becomes expensive.

"That means things like better aligning matings so that calves are more likely to hit the ground when there is fresh feed about.

"In exotic weed management, camels have made a big impression on infestations of parkinsonia, rather than having to spend big money on chemicals.

"Earlier in my father's generation, cattlemen tended to take their cues from the cattle themselves. Nowadays, we tend to look more at the grass, and if we can manage the grass well, the cattle will look after themselves."

Mr Lyons said he was impressed with the forum presentations from environmental experts such as Tim Flannery, who discussed his belief that cattle management in the right way could be part of the solution.

During the debate, the audience also heard that the Australian beef industry had achieved a 6.5 percent reduction in emissions per kilogram of beef produced since Kyoto protocol reporting began in 1990.

"A reduction in emissions/kg of beef produced is a great achievement for Australian producers," MLA managing director David Palmer said. "The Australian beef industry has increased production by 25.4pc over the same period, which demonstrates that we are able to produce much more beef, with less emissions," he said.

"The industry acknowledges that we contribute to Australia's overall emissions profile, which is why we are undertaking extensive research and development to better understand how we can continue to find ways to improve the efficiency of production.

"By doing that, the beef industry can further reduce its emissions while producing much-needed food for Australian and global consumers," Mr Palmer said.

● Michael Lyons will co-chair one of the forum sessions being held during the upcoming Charters Towers Meat Profit Day on September 2.

THE North Australian Pastoral Company's approach to sustainable property and environmental management is really about risk management in securing long-term access to resources.

Outlining her company's approach to environmental management at the Charters Towers Meat Profit Day will be NAPCo's property and environmental planner, Delphine Puxty (pictured).



NAPCo runs a beef herd of about 180,000 cattle on 14 grazing properties stretching from Central Queensland into the Northern Territory, plus a large commercial feedlot on the Darling Downs.

"Most of our cattle are run in Australia's arid rangelands where climate and land type hugely dictate what can be produced and when we can produce it," Ms Puxty said.

"Our approach has always been conservative, in order to ensure resources are not depleted in one or two seasons, or even over a decade.

"But also we're conscious that most of the natural resources we use are tied to pastoral leases and in some cases, private leases, and therefore we have a legal obligation as well as a long-term interest in ensuring that we manage our land responsibly," she said.

While such Leasehold legislation has not been widely tested, there was certainly no reason why it could not be, if properties were not appropriately managed.

Ms Puxty said like most beef producers, sustainable management for NAPCo was about balancing limited resources such as water, soil fertility and biodiversity with more abundant resources like solar/wind power and land area.

This had to be done in the most efficient way – financially, environmentally and in a human resources sense – to produce a quality product.



NAPCo composite-bred steers on Gordon Downs near Emerald.

We have a legal obligation as well as a long-term interest in ensuring that we manage our land responsibly.

"In our case, that means any 'environmental' projects have to show a financial benefit and fit into a broader, longer-term plan for each property, or the company as a whole," she said.

Specific return on investment

for each project was often difficult to quantify, however, because of concurrent innovations in other areas such as herd management or genetics. However payback tended to be longer term, rather than shorter.

Over the years, NAPCo has invested in significant sustainability projects including:

- Property planning processes.
- The Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative bore capping and piping program
- Riparian fencing and relocation of water points.
- Weed control.
- Solar power, and
- ISO 14001 Quality Assurance certification, which has been formally applied on some properties, however all properties conform to the ISO process.

In each case, the projects have had to show wider benefits than the easily identifiable "environmental" ones, through improved productivity because of changed grazing patterns, stock

water quality, or pasture growth and response, for example.

Some projects, however, have simply recognised good management spanning many decades.

One example is the declaration of three nature refuges on NAPCo properties.

"Management of these areas has not changed significantly, as the nature refuges recognise that what is done now is compatible with conservation," Ms Puxty said.

"But the agreements also ensure this is continued into the future, as well as enhancing our own understanding of land management and the ecosystem services provided by biodiversity."

While currently, beef consumers were not currently, beef consumers environmental management credentials behind commercial beef labelling or packaging, NAPCo's proactive approach to land and environmental management positions it well, should such a demand emerge.

Charters Towers MPD Program:

8.30am	Registration and trade displays open	11.00am	Module sessions Business and marketing Resources and sustainability Technology for the future
9.00am	Something old, new, borrowed and blue, Roger Landsberg, Chairman, Charters Towers MPD organising committee	12.30pm	Lunch and trade displays
9.15am	Supporting the northern cattle industry, Don Heatley, Chairman, MLA	1.30pm	Module sessions Business and marketing Resources and sustainability Technology for the future
9.30am	The global beef consumer – pampering the rich or sustaining the poor? Barney Foran Research Fellow, Institute of Land Water and Society, Charles Sturt University, Albury	3.00pm	Afternoon tea and trade displays
9.55am	Opportunities for northern beef producers, Steve Meerwald, Managing Director, Wellard Rural Exports	3.30pm	Module sessions Business and marketing Resources and sustainability Technology for the future
10.20am	Questions to all speakers	5.00pm	Keys to success – Living a cut above, Helen Everingham, Director, The Centre Within
10.30am	Morning tea and trade displays	5.20pm	The marriage of profitability and sustainability, David Palmer, Managing Director, MLA
		5.35pm	Drinks and dinner

MPD module sessions:

Module 1: Business and marketing TOPICS

What all highly profitable beef producers know and do
Profit drivers in action
Understanding Indonesian feedlots – performance & welfare

SPEAKERS

Phil Holmes
Holmes & Co, Farm Business Advisors
Dan Lynch, Tara, Cloncurry
Catherine Marriott
Principal Consultant, Yarallah Animal Nutrition

Module 2: Resources and sustainability TOPICS

Back to basics management
How to balance profitability and sustainability on-farm
People and production – a perfect match

SPEAKERS

Terry McCosker, Director, Resource Consulting Services
Delphine Puxty
NAPCO
Prue Bondfield, Palgrave Charolais

Module 3: Technology for the future TOPICS

New ways of looking at female reproduction
Reef and beef – algae products for northern beef production systems
New and exciting gadgets and to help on-farm management

SPEAKERS

Dr David Johnston
Animal Genetics and Breeding Unit, UNE
Dr Tony Parker, Senior Lecturer in Livestock Nutrition
Head of Animal Health & Production, JCU
Rodd Dyer
Manager – Northern Beef Program, MLA