

The view on improving reproductive efficiency

The chance to investigate and then potentially address reproductive issues and unexplained losses that had dogged Jim and Sarah Viner's cattle operation was too good to miss when the CashCow research project came along.

Snapshot

Jim and Sarah Viner, Gympie, Qld.



Property:
'Tressavale' - 728ha;
'Kerinyaga' - 202.5ha

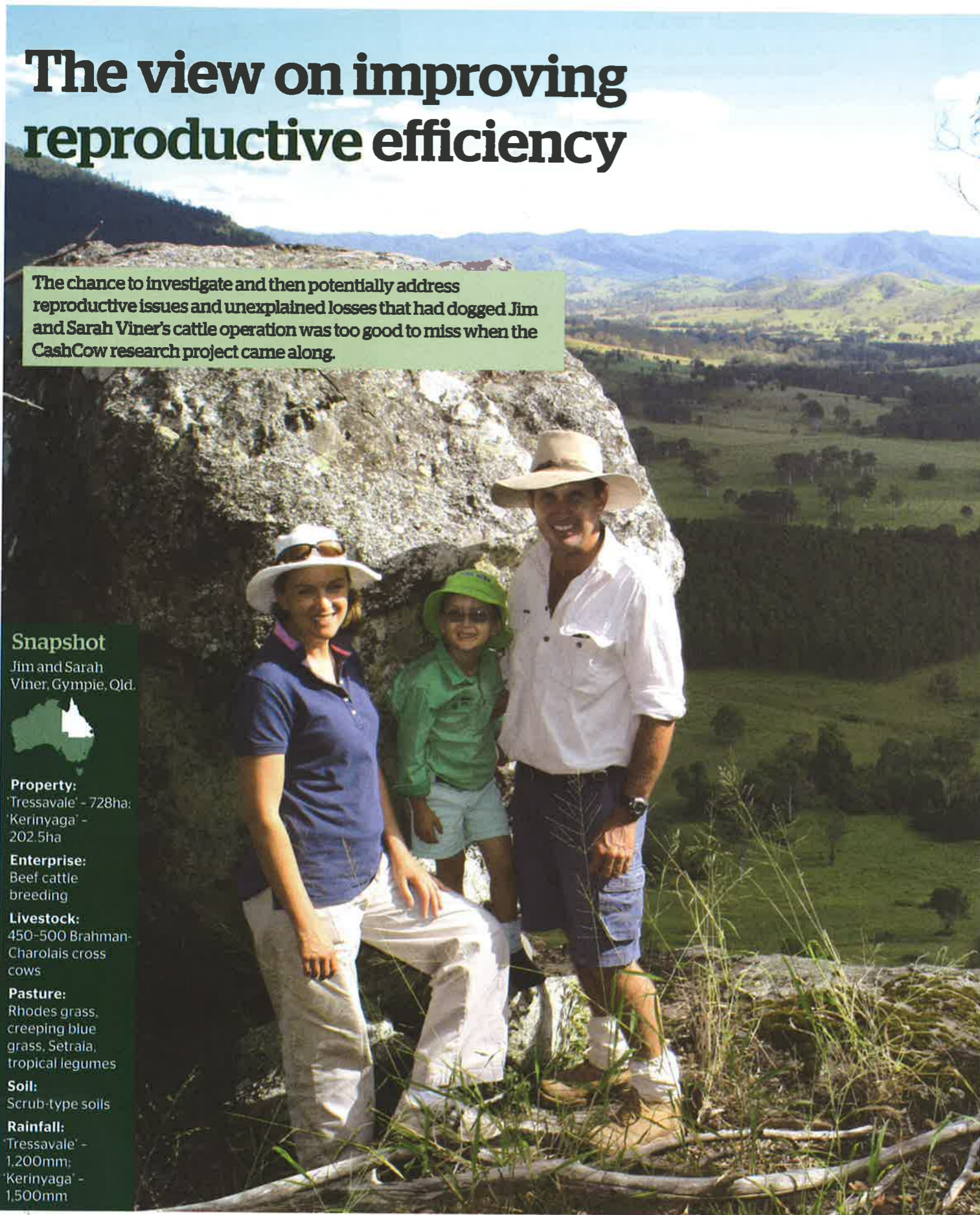
Enterprise:
Beef cattle breeding

Livestock:
450-500 Brahman-Charolais cross cows

Pasture:
Rhodes grass, creeping blue grass, Setraia, tropical legumes

Soil:
Scrub-type soils

Rainfall:
'Tressavale' - 1,200mm;
'Kerinyaga' - 1,500mm



Left: Sarah, Samuel and Jim Viner enjoy the view of their southern Queensland property near Gympie. The Viners have applied CashCow findings to improve their enterprise profitability.

For Jim Viner, the decision about whether to take part in MLA's research project on reproduction performance and profitability in northern Australia was a no brainer.

"There were a lot of things we'd come to accept such as calf losses and poor fertility in some of our cows," Jim said.

"We have trouble with wild dogs and paralysis ticks so we put losing up to 15% of our calves, between pregnancy testing and branding, down to a bit of everything.

"It was just too overwhelming to address it on our own. We tried to manage around it but didn't really know what we were managing for.

"CashCow opened our eyes and enabled us to focus on a few things."

The Viners, who run up to 500 Brahman-Charolais cross cows on two properties just east and west of Gympie, joined the project in its trial year and participated for four years.

In condition

One of the key learnings for Jim was the importance of cow body condition score and the ripple effect it has on the entire operation.

"In hindsight we've learnt a lot and changed our management as a result," he said.

"I now have a much better eye for body condition score. Before CashCow, I thought our cattle were okay but in fact they were doing it a bit tough. To address that issue we've dropped our numbers back and the timing of our weaning has become far more flexible.

"As soon as our cows are down to body condition score two to two-and-a-half we wean the calves and supplementary feed them if we have to.

"We find if we wean when cows are at two to two-and-a-half they pick up to three to three-and-a-half very quickly without having to spend lots of dollars."



Through taking part in the CashCow program the Viners discovered Pestivirus was the main reason for calf losses in their herd between pregnancy testing and branding.

The Viners keep about 80% of their heifers for replacements and the steer portion is sold off their mothers at weaner sales to the restocker market.

"In good years some of them go into the vealer trade but generally we're looking at 220-250kg steers turned off at 10 months of age," Jim said.

Jim has also given away the idea of calving his heifers at two years of age.

"It was just too hard," he said.

"We grow a lot of grass here but it's often low in protein and, with the stress of being pregnant, we found our heifers' growth was being compromised. They weren't reaching their potential mature cow size. The smaller ones were only 220kg carcass weight.

"About 50% of our income is from cull cows so by leaving them an extra year we are achieving a 300kg carcass. We're better off economically and we're not pushing the cows."

Mothers with maturity

The Viners also found that calving heifers as two-year-olds had a detrimental effect on their ability to get back in calf.

"Our heifers are our newest genetics and the females we want to keep."

As part of the CashCow program, the Viner's herd was tested for Pestivirus and Jim found this accounted for a considerable number of their losses between pregnancy testing and branding.

"We set up a plan to eradicate it from our herd and our losses at branding have reduced from 15 to 5% and we attribute most of that 5% to wild dogs," he said.

"To address that we're part of a neighbourhood baiting program, which seems to be helping, and we also carry out periodic trapping and shooting."

Jim said CashCow gave him the advice and tools to see the wood for the trees and he was keen to see a follow up program in the northern cattle industry.

"I would definitely support another program and I think it would be very interesting to see the benefits of some of those changes over time," he said.

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Read the full CashCow findings at www.mla.com.au/cashcowreport