

Riverina beef farmers ride out a bad year with sustainability

JAMES WAGSTAFF, *The Weekly Times*

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AMANDA Barlow is grateful for the small things.

“We’ve only had 130mm of rain for the year, but we’ve got 30mm in the last two weeks so it has just gone berserk,” she tells *The Weekly Times* while inspecting a paddock of dryland lucerne on her family’s NSW Riverina property last month.

“Even before that we were only really feeding five bulls. All the other cattle were managing to survive.

MORE FARMER OF THE YEAR:

“It shows you that if you have a sustainable property with sustainable pasture, you can actually ride a very bad year out.

“You’ve just got to be sensible and not let your ground cover suffer.”

Amanda and her husband, Steven, run a mixed Shorthorn beef and predominantly wheat and barley cropping business across 3440ha between Deniliquin and Mathoura. This is predominantly 400mm rainfall country, but this year they are yet to top the 165mm recorded during the district’s driest year on record.

Young cattle grazed some crops this year and while they have been since locked up and are on track to be harvested “it will be tight”.

“We got a very big rain – about four inches (100mm) – last November, so that carried us through until autumn,” Amanda said.

“From about April onwards was pretty tough.”



Forward thinking: Amanda Barlow and her son Niall with Shorthorns on their farm in southern NSW. Picture: James Wagstaff

NEW BEGINNINGS

THE Barlows moved to the Deniliquin district in 1989 when Steve, a pharmacist, came to manage the local chemist, which the family later purchased. They bought their first large farm, Heatherleigh, in 2004 and have since enlarged it with adjoining properties. Soils range from sandy to clay and there is a mixture of flood irrigation from a nearby creek as well as bore water. There is also 810ha of dryland lucerne and Amanda said the cereal crops were pivotal in the pasture rotation plan, which includes ryegrass, clover and native pastures.

Amanda's love, though, is the Shorthorns. She had grown up with the breed, with her grandfather running Shorthorns, "so they were really our first choice" when it came time to stock their property.

They started off with 10 commercial cows, which were added to the Shorthorn registered database. This year they had 354 "positive pregnancies", having built numbers up over the years on bloodlines from leading NSW and South Australian studs including Broome, Spry's, Polldale, Belmore, Bayview, Bundaleer and Broughton Park. The plan for the Barlows, who select for temperament, fertility and marbling but more importantly low birthweight, is to build female numbers up to 500.

"A dead calf has no potential so your first aim is to get that calf born, because it doesn't matter if it's high marbling or anything else, if it is dead, it is nothing," Amanda said.

Most steers are sold in JBS Australia's Tabbita feedlot, near Griffith and fed for the Thousand Guineas Shorthorn branded program, for which steers must be at least 75 per cent Shorthorn and have a marbling score of at least two to be eligible.

NATURAL INSTINCT

AMANDA said she used to concentrate closely on growth, but was now backing that off.

"Often high marbling bulls and high-fat bulls don't have the growth of the leaner bulls so that is a trade-off really, and the bigger cattle are harder to feed ... they are higher maintenance cattle," she said.

When it comes to natural joinings, the Barlows work on one bull servicing 30-40 cows.

They recently joined 92 heifers through artificial insemination, a practice they have used for the past five years. Heifers calve in mid-July, two weeks ahead of the cows, which are joined for eight weeks.

This year the calves were weaned in April, which Amanda said was "miles too late", but they were "under the illusion it was going to be a good season".

The aim is to start weaning in January as Amanda said the cows and calves ate at least a third less feed separately than they did as a combined unit.

All calves are yard-weaned, where they become used to human interaction. They also receive a backline, are vaccinated and weighed.

Two to three months after weaning, steers are weighed "to see how they are tracking".

For the past two years the Barlows have scanned all their heifers at about 340 days for intramuscular fat, with one heifer scanned last year and one this year equal second in the breed for marbling. Ten young bulls are also scanned for marbling — and on the basis of his progeny one home-bred bull last month was equal first among his Shorthorn contemporaries.

"It shows in a short time we've managed to be able to increase the marbling and through scanning we can identify the high-marbling lines," Amanda said.

She said they were one of the few Australian operations to have all its feedlot data integrated into Breedplan.

WEIGHT AND SEE

STEERS are sold as soon as less than 12 months of age when they hit the required JBS specified weights, which Amanda said depending on the season could be as low as 250kg but was usually 300-499kg.

With a minimum of 50 heifers, and specific higher weights, required to supply the Thousand Guineas brand, the Barlows sell most of their surplus heifers through the Wodonga saleyards at 10-12 months. This year they had 150 heifers, of which they kept 94 and artificially inseminated 92.

Amanda said Shorthorns struggled in saleyard situations because they were “very underestimated and we generally undersell to the Angus”.

“Our cattle are very good cattle, they have a very good carcass so they should be on par with Angus not automatically behind them,” she said.

“To me our future doesn’t lay in saleyard selling so we have to breed cattle that are good enough that they can go into a premium branded product.”

Amanda said for the Thousand Guineas brand most steers were fed in the feedlot for 100 days.

“At the moment we are getting over \$3/kg ... you’re sure of the price, so we’ve found it is a pretty good option for us,” she said.

ON THE MOOVE

AMANDA has previously kept cows until they were unproductive and did not get in calf and culled them at 12. They now plan to run a younger herd because they can forage better than their older counterparts.

This year 22 cows were sold after they had calved “when times got tough”.

While they sell a small number of bulls they are adamant they “run the stud under commercial conditions so we are not prepared to keep and feed bulls until they are two years old waiting for someone to decide whether they want to buy them or not”.

Looking forward, Amanda said the aim was to increase numbers “and we’ll have to be very strict with getting rid of the older cows”. “You can’t be breeding yesterday’s cattle,” she said. “You’ve got to be moving all the time, thinking how you can make your operation more efficient.”