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LOT FEEDING OF BEEF CATTLE

1. INTRODUCTION

By W. J. WILKIE, B.V.Sc., Senior Animal Husbandry Adviser

"LOT FEEDING" of cattle is the name given to the operation of bringing cattle in from pasture and giving them the total ration they are to receive in open or partly roofed yards. The roof would be intended to protect the feed trough and not the cattle.

The system is expensive and is not in great use in Australia.

It is employed by stud breeders for some of the animals they are preparing for show or sale. It is occasionally used, in a primitive sort of way, when commercial cattle are being held during transit, or before or after a sale.

Some investigations have been made into the use of lot feeding to prolong the fattening season beyond the usual short Australian spring growing season. This use is of great interest and more work is needed to examine the possibility of holding store cattle in strong thrifty condition to take advantage of the spring flush, and also the possibility of topping up cattle not quite finished at the end of the growing season.

Lot feeding trials have been carried out in a number of States and in enough trials for us to have a very good idea of the growth rates attainable and the value of most types of local feeds. Some small-scale commercial enterprises have been started but have not persisted.

There is a very good case for examining the possibility of lot feeding young breeding females in the pastoral areas; in this case feeding for survival could show great profits in subsequent production. Some of this work has been done in Queensland with promising results.

This series of articles will attempt to set out the problems and requirements for lot feeding of cattle, especially in relation to Western Australian conditions, and will discuss the economics of the project.
GENERAL PROBLEMS

The first and most constant problem is the cost/return factor. The end product is meat and this will be sold on a market which receives a greatly fluctuating supply of the grass-fed product.

The supply of grass-fed meat varies remarkably, being influenced by such things as—

(a) The tendency of many producers to “follow” high prices. That is, they go in for beef when prices are high, causing further competition. When their additional production reaches the market it helps to weaken prices; producers in this class then tend to quit their cattle. The result is a fluctuation which follows a seven to 10 year cycle.

(b) Our increasing population. This will lead to changes in the relative values of home and overseas markets.

(c) Seasonal growth of pastures. Many cattle have to be marketed over a short period as the pasture growing season comes to an end.

(d) Droughts, when they occur over large areas.

(e) Changes in overseas demands.

(f) Changes in prosperity of the consumer both at home and abroad.

These factors make prediction of beef market prices difficult. Because of this, the best aim is the regular production of a high quality product—that is, one that commands top prices—as efficiently as possible. Production planning should not be on an annual basis but on a “cycle” basis. On such a basis periods of high and low profits can be expected, although they cannot always be anticipated, and it should be a normal expectation that a high return year should carry some of the costs in a low return year.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

Technical problems are those concerning stock health and handling, feed, facilities and management. Each will be dealt with in later sections.

The Department of Agriculture receives a surprising number of enquiries about lot feeding of beef cattle. Anyone interested in establishing lot feeding in W.A. should consider whether they can answer the questions


Why?

Why should you have a feed lot at all? The answer must be either “to make money” or because there is a hankering to try a new field without much thought of the profits or loss involved.
Having decided on the feed lot venture why should each step be taken? This usually comes down to:—

(a) increasing possibilities of profit;
(b) maintaining property appearance and value;
(c) human safety and comfort.

(b) and (c) are not so easily measured by the accountant. They are often given little attention.

When?
Timing will be essential to success. All necessary provision for safe and efficient handling of the cattle, and of the total feed they will need, must be made before the cattle reach the feed lot. Planning for replacement cattle as batches are sent to market must be well in advance. Arrangements may be made for yearly drafts from grazing areas. In a large-scale operation in Australia it might pay to have a “holding property” for such purchases.

The aim should be to keep the costly feed lot facilities in constant employment, for two main reasons; firstly, to reduce costs and second, to provide a continuous supply of quality meat and so build up confidence in the purchaser.

Where?
In long term operation it has been found more profitable to take the cattle to the feed rather than the feed to the cattle. Some feeds cannot be easily transported. So that the general location should be near reliable sources of feed stuffs.

Dryness is an asset, and this may be a matter of locating in a dry area or on a specially well-drained site.

Cattle may be transported very long distances to feed lots. In America average distances of 800 to 1,200 miles are not unusual. It is not desirable to have to transport the finished beast too far. Shrinkage and loss of eating and keeping quality will occur if the fattened beast is subjected to too much stress.

What?
This covers finance, cattle, feed, facilities, and markets.

Some aspects of these have been discussed. Much of the rest will be discussed in detail later.

At this point the question should be answered by saying that everything needed for efficiency and profit must be provided but it is necessary to keep capital expenditure within bounds. The proportion of final costs, other than feed costs, must be kept low.

How?
There is little previous experience in Australia of how the facilities needed should be designed or constructed. We will have to learn from overseas, or, as is not unusual in Australia, manage by improvisation. The first step is to consider carefully the requirements for a workable feed lot. These requirements will be discussed in detail in later articles.
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