

Feedlotting tour is food for thought

In a poor cropping year, farmers in the Upper North consider livestock as the enterprise that 'pulls them through'. The Upper North Farming Systems (UNFS) project is focusing on several projects and activities that aim to make livestock production in the region more than just a back-up enterprise. One such activity was the feedlot tour held last February with independent nutritionist San Jolly of Productive Nutrition.

The Upper North Farming System project covers a vast area from Peterborough to Port Pirie and as far north as Quorn, targeting the less than 350mm annual rainfall areas, explained project coordinator Ali Cooper of Rural Solutions SA. Rainfall becomes less winter dominant, further north and systems become more extensive as the group includes some pastoral country.

Livestock enterprises range from self-replacing merinos for wool production, cross bred prime lamb production and cattle. For the majority of producers in this area feedlotting is of interest to help manage the feed gap in the late summer period, when the stubbles have been grazed-off.

Producers attending the feedlot tour visited five feedlots in the area and were impressed by the fact that a feedlot can be established relatively cheaply. They also reported that from the day they learnt how important it is to optimise nutrition and to maintain a clean, fresh water supply.

To ensure nutrition is correct producers need to establish whether the feedlot is aiming to maintain stock or to grow meat or finish livestock for market. For example, if sheep are purely being maintained in a feedlot, they will need to consume a ration that equates to two percent of their body weight; however if the aim is to put on liveweight then the ration should be four percent of the body weight.

San Jolly emphasised that feed quantity can not be considered independently of quality. Feed testing of hay and grain is the starting point for an appropriate ration. She explained that from a practical perspective protein is the driver of growth, whilst energy is the driver of maintaining condition but a balance is required in every ration.

It is generally more cost effective to feed grain rather than hay in a maintenance feedlot, as grain is a concentrated energy source. However, to work, the rumen requires some long fibre or roughage, so this must not be totally excluded from the maintenance ration. San recommended that irrespective of feeding sheep or cattle for maintenance or growth the fibre content of the ration should be 15 % of the total dry weight of feed consumed.

Having established the objective of the feedlot and the quality of the available feeds, the next step is to assess the body condition of the stock and to develop a cost effective ration. For growing cattle lupins and barley mixes, together with good quality cereal hay and for prime lamb production oats, lupins and barley together with good quality legume hay are considered productive rations. However, these rations are likely to require additional minerals, especially calcium and potassium if there is no shade.

Just because a ration works on paper, does not mean that it will be eaten or sustain animals.

Last years producers in this region learnt the hard way when feeding screenings to stock. Screenings can have a relatively good feed test, however, if feed whole and with a low fibre ration the screenings were passing through the animal undigested, resulting in a loss of body condition, despite receiving a ration that added up on paper.

Other aspect of feedlotting that the tour discussed were the location of the feedlot, whether the animals were confined or free ranging, water supply, feed preparation and feeding methods, and health management.

Based on the success of the UNFS feedlotting tour, similar tours have been run by the Mallee Sustainable Farming System and Eyre Peninsula Grain & Graze groups.