Talgai Droughtmasters – Performance focused breeding.

The Veivers family (Wayne, Judy, Grant and Julie), principals of Talgai Droughtmaster stud have been breeding Droughtmaster cattle for over 17 years. Their herd was originally located at “Talgai”, Guanaba, South East Queensland but due to the need for expansion of both their stud and commercial breeding herds they purchased “Rewan” in 1995.

“Rewan” is a 17,400 ha (43,000 ac) property located south of Rolleston, adjacent to the Carnarvon national park. It predominantly consists of grazing country of both native forest (Mitchell, blue, black spear grasses) and improved which has been blade ploughed and seeded with buffel, rhodes (grasses), wynn cassia and butterfly pea (legumes).

The Veivers have also introduced a 490 ha (1200 ac) stand of leucaena, into their grazing system. Leucaena is a shrubby legume, native to Mexico which has very high nutritive value for a tropical or sub-tropical forage plant. Between the leucaena rows callide rhodes grass and bisset creeping bluegrass has been planted to take advantage of the nitrogen on offer from this legume species.

1600 ha (4000 ac) of cultivation in also under production at “Rewan”. This is used to grow opportunity grain or forage crops. Grain and forage from this enterprise is regularly used in their 1000 head licensed feedlot.

The Talgai Droughtmaster stud herd consists of approximately 200 breeders. They are run in five single sire joining groups and currently are all naturally mated. Wayne Veivers adds “AI and ET programs have been used in the past and potentially will be in the future but due to the time involved in such programs and the minimal labour inputs at “Rewan” it is not currently practical.”

Heifers join the breeding herd depending on their weight as yearlings (400 days). If they weigh 320 kg or above they are joined, if not they are let grow out and are joined the following season. Controlled mating is used with all calves hitting the ground between August and December.

The culling program used in the Talgai breeding herd is based on production rather than age. Wayne comments that he feels “age itself is not a good enough reason for culling. If the females are productive and calve every year and still show good constitution then they stay in the herd. If they pregnancy test empty then they definitely leave the breeding herd. Conformation and constitution play a major role in our culling and heifer selection.”
The Veivers family offer approximately 80 Talgai bulls per year, with half being sold on farm and half through DSBS sales. The bulls are selected through visual appraisal (type, conformation) and on performance records (EBVs). Sale highlights include sale topping Talgai bulls being sold at Rockhampton, Roma, Clermont and again Rockhampton for $46000, $12000, $14000 and $60000 respectively, at four consecutive sales.

Along with the stud herd, approximately 2000 commercial breeders are run at “Rewan”. The majority of the breeders are Droughtmasters and they are generally joined to Droughtmaster bulls. These bulls are either bred from their stud herd or bought in from Droughtmaster sales. Wayne states that “10 herd bulls were purchased at a recent Charters Towers sale to enter our commercial herd.”

“In the past we have used crossbreeding in our commercial herd with Red Angus and Charolais bulls, but find that they generally will not cover as many breeders or work as hard as the Droughtmaster bulls. The crossbred calves will generally weigh more due hybrid vigour but there are simply not enough of them to make an impact. The environmental adaptation of the Droughtmaster obviously gives them the advantage.”

The pedigree and performance recording of the Talgai herd has recently moved from paper to the new herd recording program, HerdMaster. Along with pedigree records the Veivers’ record the weight performance of all progeny at 200, 400 and 600 days.

The Talgai stud herd has been performance recorded with Droughtmaster BREEDPLAN for 15 years. They first made use of within-herd EBVs in their selection decisions but have since made more productive gains through GROUP BREEDPLAN EBVs which allows animals to be compared for specific traits across different Droughtmaster herds.

Wayne adds “BREEDPLAN is one tool used in our selection decisions but it is used in conjunction with visual appraisal. We first use EBVs on our stud animals in our selection decisions. The use of them in marketing is just an added benefit.”

“In the first 12 months in BREEDPLAN we did not get a lot of benefit from the data as a selection tool. It took approximately 5 years for our data to build up, our accuracies to rise and to gain the confidence in our EBVs. We now have a lot of confidence in the EBVs”

The value of EBVs as a selection tool was recognised by the Veivers family through buying past sires without EBVs available. Wayne recounts the situation of selecting two potential sires on visual appraisal alone and paying $3,500 for one and $13,500 for the other bidding against knowledgeable cattlemen at a national sale.
Both sires have been used in the Talgai herd and currently have approximately 130 progeny each performance recorded with BREEDPLAN. The lower price bull had calves that weighed consistently heavier at 200, 400 and 600 days of age. The EBVs produced reflected this with the lower and higher price bull having 600 day weight EBVs of +24 and -9 respectively. Price and visual appearance does not necessarily equate to performance.

Wayne also mentions “the lower price, higher weight EBV sire has produced bull progeny that, not only weigh more to 600 days, but they have returned over $300,000 while the higher price, low weight EBV bull has produced bull progeny returning $150,000.

An added benefit of knowing the genetic performance (EBVs) of the two sires in question is that the breeding program can be re-assessed to cater for the new information. That is, the genetically lower growth bull can be joined to higher growth females and vice versa. This information was available after weighing the first drop of calves at weaning, well before it would have been picked up visually.

Wayne comments “having EBVs available on these sires at the sale may not have changed my mind in purchasing them but it definitely would have allowed me make a more informed decision in assessing the Talgai breeding at their first joining.

Wayne concludes “the perfect beef breeding animal does not exist but it is what we strive to achieve in our breeding program. BREEDPLAN is one tool that helps us move closer to the unachievable goal of perfection.”

For further information on Talgai Droughtmasters contact the Veivers family on Ph: (07) 4984 3487, (07) 5537 2585 or Email: rewan@bigpond.com.