

Beef Cattle Production: Managing a small beef herd

Fact Sheet series for the
Small Rural Landholder

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Regional overview

Southern Victoria is well suited to beef production because of its reliable rainfall and diversity of soil types capable of growing highly productive improved pastures.

For new land owners with limited experience there are a number of steps you should be considering before deciding on what type of cattle enterprise you will have on your property. It will take a year or so to get to know your land with all its strengths and weaknesses so don't feel you have to set everything up in the first 12 months.

A good approach is to start to address the following issues:

1. Start to observe how the landscape changes from season to season – i.e.% groundcover, feedgaps, climatic influences
2. Identify areas which become waterlogged during the winter months
3. Identify the dominant pasture species and assess how well are they growing
4. Determine how reliable farm water supply is from dams and bores
5. Assess fences (particularly the boundary fence) to ensure they are in sound enough condition to contain cattle.

Property Identification Code (PIC) number

Whatever type of livestock you intend to have you should contact the the Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport & Resources (DEDJTR) for a Property Identification Code (PIC) number. Phone 1800 678 779. The previous owner may have a PIC but it is not transferrable to a new owner. The purpose of a PIC is partly for marketing and traceability, but also for locating properties and owners who have livestock in an area threatened by a disease outbreak. Once you have a PIC you can then go on line to register with Meat and Livestock Australia* that oversees the Livestock Production Assurance scheme and issue the National Vendor Declaration (NVD) Waybill books. These are forms you will need to complete and provide with any consignment of livestock you wish to sell.

Cattle yards

You will also need to have a well-designed and functional set of cattle yards capable of safely handling the number of stock in a mob. Importantly it needs a good operating crush where a vet can work safely if needing to treat your cattle. The loading ramp also needs to be solid and preferably with an access ramp built on the side for the truck driver to safely load your cattle.

Enterprise type

Deciding on what type of cattle enterprise is a key question particularly for new landholders with little if any experience. Breeding cows for vealer production may be appealing but will require a more in depth understanding of animal husbandry and time than just buying in and growing out young steers. Running cows and calves requires greater attention to health and nutrition issues throughout the year than steers, which are less prone to the challenges of cold winters and the calving and metabolic disorders a breeding herd may have to endure.

If buying in young weaner steers be conservative in the number you purchase. For example they may only weigh 300-350 kilograms when they come onto your property but if growing well they may double in weight before they are sold thereby effectively doubling the stocking rate.



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COMMON
GROUND



Key management considerations

- Register for a Property Identification Code (PIC)
- Cattle yards – design and functionality
- Enterprise selection – type and purpose of animal
- Stocking rate – overstocking versus understocking
- Take twelve months to get to know the property to better understand seasonal on-ground changes
- Reliable water supply to all paddocks is essential
- Frequent monitoring of cattle welfare is critical
- Rotationally graze paddocks to maximise pasture growth and feed availability



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Stocking rate

Overstocking: leads to heavy reliance on hand feeding, increased levels of both internal and external parasite infestations resulting in poor weight gains and possibly weight loss through the winter months. It will also likely result in degraded pastures which cannot grow to their potential which further compounds the problem of providing adequate nutrition.

Understocking: this strategy can help you gain experience in livestock and pasture management; meet your cattle's nutritional needs comfortably, resulting in less animal health issues and faster growth rates to meet the market weights needed when selling.

Pasture management

One of the important skills in any grazing enterprise is to manage your pastures in a way which optimises pasture growth to meet the nutritional needs of livestock. This involves a system of rotational grazing where animals are moved regularly to a new paddock allowing pasture time to recover and produce new growth before they return in 4-5 weeks. If you don't have sufficient paddocks this can still be achieved by using strip grazing where an electric fencing tape provides temporary fencing to restrict the area where cattle can graze.

Industry experience

It will be worthwhile talking with neighbours to benefit from their experiences with running cattle and also making contact with some of the other people who provide some of the services involved in farming.

Markets

There are several saleyards serving the Gippsland and Mornington Peninsula regions. These are bases for livestock selling agents who can help you through the process of buying and selling cattle. Before you purchase your livestock consider a trip to the saleyards to observe how that system works and also get an idea of the prices for different weights, ages and breeds of cattle.

Direct farm-gate and web-based marketing are becoming more popular pathways for smaller holdings to sell product. You need to investigate relevant accreditation necessary for these sale options.

Animal welfare

Finally with livestock ownership comes the responsibility of their basic welfare needs. No matter how few livestock you own someone needs to monitor that they have access to adequate feed and water along with shade and shelter. During the summer months water is critical to cattle survival, so they should be checked at least every couple of days and preferably every day during extreme heat events.

Useful information:

Australia's beef industry

<http://www.mla.com.au/Cattle-sheep-and-goat-industries/Industry-overview/Cattle>

Meat & Livestock Australia 2015. National Livestock Identification System

<http://www.mla.com.au/Meat-safety-and-traceability/National-Livestock-Identification-System/NLIS-contacts>

Meat & Livestock Australia. Cattle, sheep and goat fact sheets

<http://www.mla.com.au/Cattle-sheep-and-goat-industries/Industry-overview>

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