

Taking the leucaena leap

By MELISSA MARTIN

PASTURE health is a critical factor in the successful use of leucaena in grazing operations where the perennial legume is used as part of a production system.

That was among the key messages delivered last week when North Burnett district beef producers, Ron and Anne Carige, threw open the gates of their fattening property, Boyne Lea, Mundubbera, for a field day examining grazing strategies.

Just how leucaena fits into the Cariges' rotational grazing operation, and the importance of maintaining good pastures in addition to good leucaena management were discussed at length, providing the more than 40 beef producers and industry experts in attendance with a very personal insight into its use.

Since the Cariges first moved to Boyne Lea six years ago, they have planted 324 hectares (800 acres) of Cunningham leucaena across eight different paddocks, where it is used to finish off cattle to supply the milk and two-tooth market selling direct to processors.

"We have two cattle rotation mobs going around the property all the time," Mr Carige said.

"When the cattle first come here, they go into a grass rotation.

"Once they reach around the 500kg mark, we draft them off and they go into the leucaena herd, then they just keep rotating around the leucaena paddocks until we turn them off at around 600kg liveweight."

The Cariges had grown leucaena on their previous property at Thangool and decided to again plant the legume at Mundubbera for its multiple advantages.

"The only way to make dollars in this industry is through actual kilograms of beef," Mr Carige said.

"The fact leucaena is a high-protein feed and once you plant it you've got it for 30 years is what works for us.

"When we first came down here, we tried ryegrass and lucerne under the centre pivot and it was a nightmare for us – we kept losing cattle through bloat with the lucerne.

"We came here in April 2004, and by December that year we had our first 100 acres of leucaena in and kept going.

"To us, leucaena is just a lot simpler for the cattle operation.

"We see it as a two-edged sword – while it's benefiting our cattle, it's also



Beef producer Ron Carige in one of his paddocks of Cunningham leucaena with Gayndah buffel planted between rows at his fattening property, Boyne Lea, Mundubbera.

benefiting the soil and putting nitrogen back into the soil."

While Mr Carige is an advocate of the benefits of using leucaena for improving liveweight gains, he readily admits it's not everyone's "cup of tea".

"I think people could look at what we have here and think it looks pretty good, but a lot of work had to go into it," he said.

"People need to see leucaena as a tool available to them.

"We're about striking the balance between carrying numbers and weight gain.

"We work on an average 0.8kg weight gain per day. If we can achieve that average all year round off the leucaena, we're happy.

"Last year we did better than that at times and averaged up to 2kg, but things have got to be right.

We certainly wouldn't be doing what we're doing without the leucaena.

"A couple of years ago when it was really dry, we only got 9.5 inches (240mm) here for the whole year and the whole place was just brown.

"But we had two paddocks of leucaena near the house and they were the only green in the whole district.

"It's certainly a good back-up."

Mr Carige said among the big lessons he had learnt over time about leucaena was the absolute need to keep pastures healthy, and manage leucaena well, particularly in the first 12 months of growth.

"You have to be very particular in the first 12 months of planting it, and leave it until it gets to be at least a metre or more high," Mr Carige said.

"I also think more emphasis needs to be placed on the energy side, through grass, as well as the protein side, through the leucaena, and in striking the right balance between energy and protein.

"We certainly wouldn't be doing what we're doing without the leucaena, but you need your grass as well."

Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation

(DEEDI) senior pasture agronomist Stuart Buck, who attended the field day at Boyne Lea, said producers could learn a lot from the Cariges' operation.

"There is a feeling that leucaena has been talked up too much in the past and seen as the silver bullet, and in some cases it hasn't actually lived up to expectations for some producers," Mr Buck said.

"But having said that, it is very good in the right situation when managed correctly.

"I tell producers my rough rule of thumb is if you have cattle on grass only, you might get around 60kg of beef per hectare, whereas leucaena might do 120kg of beef per hectare.

"It's about increasing weight gain per animal and Ron's cattle on leucaena are performing very well.

"There are some tricks to the establishment of leucaena.

"If you follow a few basic principles including preparing the country well and getting good subsoil moisture before planting, controlling the weeds, using good seed, and planting on time, you just can't go wrong.

"Leucaena is the Rolls Royce of legumes because it's the best we do have production wise, and the most persistent in lasting 30 or more years.

"It's got a long life. It's a very tough plant once it's established, and will grow on a range of soil types.

"The best results come from leucaena where it's grown in soils that are tired and run down and have low nitrogen levels.

"If you've got buffel country that has been cleared and grazed for 50 or 60 years and is not being as productive as it used to be and the pastures aren't as vigorous, leucaena is the best-case scenario for that.

"It will supply protein to the animals and nitrogen to the soils, which will also enhance grass growth.

"Whereas if you put it into country that is still very vigorous and weight gains are ok, you will get an advantage, but not as great.

"When producers are deciding whether or not to plant leucaena, they need to look at their existing systems and ask 'are my cattle performing; what weight gains am I getting?'

"You can't manage what you don't monitor. So if you don't monitor your cattle in the first place, how are you going to know if leucaena or other options are going to be worthwhile for you?"

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