Understanding herd performance requires clarity in classifications

Ian McLean[A], Harry Evans

Bush AgriBusiness Pty Ltd, Toowoomba QLD 4350

Introduction

Industry analyses have identified that there is substantial variation in herd performance across the beef industry and significant room for improvement in herd performance (Henderson et al., 2013, McLean et al., 2023).

Accurate herd numbers are important to understanding improving herd performance; however, there is no standard way to record and classify livestock numbers, resulting in many producers being unaware of performance issues within their herd. Having accurate herd data isn't easy, animals not staying in the paddock they were put in, growing, reproducing and dying in unknown numbers all contribute to the challenge.

However, the challenge is compounded by the lack of consistency around livestock classifications and when and how animals move from one class to another as they age.

Discussion

To address this issue, we recommend three primary attributes be used to classify animals in extensive beef herds;

- AgeYear: the year corresponding to the brand &/or tag colour used
- Sex: female, castrate or bull
- Reproductive Status: reproducing or non-reproducing

AgeYear is not necessarily the birth year, it is the brand number &/or tag colour that is applied to each age group of calves. This typically (but not universally) corresponds to the financial year of birth in Northern Australia (i.e. those born in FY26 are #26), and calendar year in southern Australia. Whilst there may be differences in how individual businesses apply AgeYear, if it is consistently applied by each business, it can still be used as a reliable attribute. The default tag colour relating to the AgeYear should be used.

Sex will only change if natural increase recorded as bulls are subsequently castrated. Reproductive status should only change once, if females no longer intended for reproduction are retained to finish or grow out before sale, the reproductive status will change to non-reproducing. All young females intended for reproduction should be classified as reproducing until it is decided otherwise. Classifying grown cleanskin bulls as non-reproducing distinguishes them from herd bulls.

These three attributes are unambiguous, do not frequently change, and provide a standardised way of categorising livestock.

Conclusion

Removing ambiguity in livestock classifications will improve the accuracy of herd record keeping. Accurate record keeping will result in an improved understanding of actual herd performance. This approach is expanded on in the Australian Herd Classification Guidelines (Bush AgriBusiness, 2025).

References

Bush AgriBusiness 2025. Australian Herd Classification Guidelines. In: Bush Agribusiness (ed.). 120 James Street Toowoomba Qld 4350.

Henderson, A., Perkins, N. & Banney, S. 2013. Determining property-level rates of breeder cow mortality in Northern Australia. Meat and Livestock Australia.

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[A] Corresponding author: ian@bushagri.com.au