



Ian Duncan
WERRIBEE AGRICULTURE
Victoria

“THE BIGGEST BENEFIT IS THE SAVING IN WASTED FEED”

Ian Duncan is the cattle manager at Werribee Agriculture, the ‘stand-alone’ farming business arm of Melbourne Water. Originally set up to deal with the permanent supply of lush pasture produced by irrigation of the land from the sewerage works, sheep grazing commenced there in 1899 and cattle grazing in 1902.

Melbourne Water’s Western Treatment Plant is more than 11,000 hectares in area and is a world leader in environmentally-friendly sewage treatment.

60% of Melbourne’s sewage is treated here; an interesting aspect is that one of the first processes is to capture and divert the methane gas to a power station on the property which feeds electricity back into the grid.

The business is continuing to pursue agricultural opportunities as land use changes from sewage treatment, which ceased in December, 2004, to recycled water irrigation. This change provides an opportunity to greatly improve the flexibility and viability of the agricultural operation.

EXTENSIVE STOCK OPERATION

Ian has worked at the Werribee farm for over 30 years, and recalls starting out checking the stock on horseback. These days it’s all ATV’s and four-wheel-drives around the extensive property.

The twenty members of the farm staff manage around 15,000 head of cattle and 30,000 sheep and lambs.

The cattle are mostly Angus, sourced from the pure bulls of the ‘Ythanbrae’ bloodline – the Lawson’s stud at Yea. It is a self-replacing herd and they use some AI.

“We use Charolais bulls over the cull cows so that we can use the cross-breed calves as markers,” Ian explains. “The black calves are the pure lines and we can track the sires to keep straight bloodlines. The culled cows go to a local export abattoir; the prime lambs are sold primarily to the domestic market.”

Mature cows and heifers are run in family groups, ear-notched according to their grandsire, and joined en masse for

six weeks to sire groups of bulls from a complementary genetic line.

Just on 5000 cows calve in spring and 2500 autumn calvers with the split calving designed to spread the turnoff of feeder steers and to make better use of the bull team.

All calves are yard weaned at six to seven months of age, but a modification of yard weaning, known as cross weaning, has been trialled and proved successful.

“Cross weaning involves weaned calves being run with an unweaned mob of cows and calves. The cows with calves settle the weaned calves down straight away and from our experience it works well.” Werribee Agriculture has about 1200 hectares of dryland canola, wheat and barley crops, and a further 500 hectares are irrigated for lucerne, maize and grain for their own stock consumption.

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The farm operation buys recycled water from the treatment plant to irrigate the pastures and this supports the livestock breeding and trading business as well as the cropping operations. Like any other agricultural business, availability and distribution of the available water is not always predictable.

CUTTING BACK WASTAGE

At the time of our visit, in mid-July, the farm was using fifteen large square bales of hay per day to feed out to the cattle. Some of the hay is grown on the property, but some still has to be sourced elsewhere.

To reduce hay wastage around the place, they bought a few second-hand Waste-Not Stockfeeders units some time ago, and have been so impressed with their

bossing and bullying. Each animal gets its fair ration, and trampling or soiling of feed is eliminated.

The feeders are designed to ensure that all the feed is contained in the unit and eating takes place within the feeder. A skirt eliminates valuable leaf being blown away by wind or trampled into the mud or dust. The stock have access to all the valuable protein which enhances weight gain, and many farmers claim feed savings of up to 30 or 40%.

SAVING TIME AND LABOUR

“We’re using them in the paddocks for the weaners, but mainly in the yards for the majority of the cattle”, says Ian Duncan. “We’ve put together a system which works very well for our six holding yards. We have a large oval Waste-Not feeder

middle of the yards, from hay being trampled and left. That is not the case now. The cattle clean up everything that is in the feeders. We also have an adjustable calf unit which works very well for the purpose.”

As you’d expect from a farm enterprise of this size, the logistics to keep it running efficiently are interesting: “We are processing some type of livestock every week of the year,” says Ian, “and we have a logistics officer whose job it is to keep track of things like the vaccination and drenching programmes as well as arrival and delivery schedules.”



performance that they have ordered ten more oval and round units.

Waste-Not hay feeders are manufactured in a number of sizes and shapes and are extremely robust to take the knocks and pressure put on them by hungry cattle.

Individual feeding spaces, between steel arches, act as a voluntary head bail, so that uneaten feed falls back into the feeder. Importantly, it largely eliminates

in the centre of two of the yards and one on each of the adjoining fences. We’ve modified the fences so that the cows can feed over the fence from the other yards. This way the tractor only needs to access two yards to fill the feeders. It saves time and labour.

“But the biggest benefit is the saving in wasted feed. You can see the big mounds that have built up over the years in the

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