

Appetite for learning delivers results

South Australian beef and lamb producer Alistair Just has an unparalleled appetite for learning and a thirst for knowledge – he believes it is the only way to continually improve his business.

Whether it's formal courses and workshops, advice from consultants or simply conversations with other producers, Alistair said he tried to take something of value out of everything.

The 30-year-old began managing the family-owned property on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula 18 months ago, the first family member since his grandfather 60 years ago to live and run the property.

While Alistair grew up in Adelaide, he spent many holidays on the property and said he "always knew" he wanted to be a full-time producer so after school attended Marcus Oldham Agricultural College.

He then worked on a number of other properties before earning the

“[By] grazing this way we have seen a huge reduction in weeds and don't even need to spray them – just through grazing management we've achieved the improvement we needed.”

family trust to take on the stewardship of the family enterprise.

While he and his wife Olivia have only been living on and managing the family property since July last year, in that time Alistair has already implemented a number of changes designed to improve productivity and profitability.

Key points

- Formal and informal learning is key to improving business.
- Increased heifer retention delivers improved genetics and increased livestock sale returns.
- Better grazing management improves pasture quality.

More Beef from Pastures

Ongoing learning and improvement was a must for any business, he said.

“Every course I do, I try to pick up one thing to implement to pay for the course.”

For example, Alistair will increase heifer retention from 20% to 80% this year, a 'take out' from The Beef Producers Workshop which was delivered by Megan Beck from Pasture Systems Consulting.

“Retaining 80% of our heifers for joining will get the newer, better genetics through faster and it will increase the value of our sale stock – instead of selling heifers for about \$400 we will be selling cows at \$600–\$700,” he said.

“That will be a \$50,000 increase in livestock sales alone.

“We will be reducing the average age of the herd so there should also be fewer animal health problems.”

Alistair said the only downside to retaining the additional heifers for joining would be having so many heifers calving at the same time but was confident this could be managed.

“We will have to do a fair bit of work to grow the heifers out as quickly as possible to get them up to joining weight but we should be able to do it.”

“All facets”

Based on tools from MLA's More Beef from Pastures program, The Beef Producers Workshop consisted of five full-day sessions spread out over a couple of months. Alistair said



Producer information

Producer: Alistair Just

Location:

Sellicks Hill, SA (60km south of Adelaide)

Property area:

Main property 1,200ha and second 110ha

Enterprise:

Feeder steers, prime lambs

Goal:

To continually learn and improve the profitability and sustainability of the business

Livestock:

800 Merino ewes, 3,000 first-cross ewes, 300 black baldy breeders, 200 steers and heifers, 100 Friesian bulls

Pastures:

Predominantly perennial, ryegrass and clover based, phalaris with some lucerne in lower lying areas

Soil types:

Main property sandy loam, smaller block sandy loam with fertile creek flats.

Annual rainfall:

Main property ranges from 550mm near coast to 800mm near hills, smaller block 950mm

it was one of the most beneficial courses that he had attended.

It brought together a range of different consultants, covering “all facets” of the beef business from finance to pastures and livestock.

“It was also a small group of about a dozen, so we were really able to have some good discussions among ourselves and with the consultants,” he said.

Alistair said the workshop cost of \$800 was “very, very cheap for what I got out of it.”

“Aside from the value of the changes I've made as a result, the cost of the



South Australian producer Alistair Just considers ongoing learning as an important factor for any business.

workshop was low compared to what it would have cost for each consultant to visit the farm.”

In particular, staggering the sessions over time instead of one block not only made it easier to attend but also allowed time to digest information and think about it in the context of your own enterprise, Alistair said.

The Beef Producers Workshop is just one of many courses Alistair has undertaken over the years, with Prograze and TechnoGraze courses being two others and elements of all being put to use in the business.

TechnoGraze

The Just family enterprise at Sellicks Hill, 60km south of Adelaide, is based on 1,310ha, with a main 1,200ha property and a 110ha block nearby on more fertile, higher rainfall country.

The breeding stock includes 3,800 ewes and 300 breeders, mainly black baldy with the intention to convert to a pure Angus herd over the next few years.

The target market is to sell 18-month-old, 400kg-plus feeder steers either to feedlots or through the yards.

Alistair is also changing his grazing management practices as a result of the TechnoGraze course he undertook in New Zealand last year.

“TechnoGrazing is really just taking rotational grazing as far as it can go – similar to strip grazing, moving all your stock every other day onto fresh pasture,” he said.

While Alistair has not changed over completely to this, he has taken the concept and implemented elements

of it onto the smaller, higher rainfall block that he has managed for the past four years.

“We’ve fenced off the laneways using temporary fencing – electric wires – and we’ve set up small troughs all the way up the fenceline.”

Steers are finished on this system, with mobs of 10-15 grazed on 4ha strips. The mobs are moved on an 18-day rotation in the peak of spring and up to 65 days in the middle of winter.

“When we took on this block four years ago we thought we would have to improve pastures conventionally but grazing this way we have seen a huge reduction in weeds and don’t even need to spray them – just through grazing management we’ve achieved the improvement we needed.”

While formal courses have played a significant role in Alistair’s approach to the business, learning from peers was often undervalued, he said.

A group of producers he attended a Prograze course with a few years ago still meet every second month for a farmwalk and to compare experiences.

This type of ongoing support group is invaluable, he said.

More information

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More Beef from Pastures: The producer’s manual

The MLA More Beef from Pastures program was launched in 2004.

Central to the program is *The producer’s manual*, a one-stop information package delivering the essential processes for a successful beef business. It provides tools to help increase productivity while minimising risk in an ever-changing operating environment.

The manual has eight modules that address different aspects of the production system in a pasture-based beef enterprise.

- Setting directions
- Tactical stock control
- Pasture growth
- Pasture utilisation
- Cattle genetics
- Weaner throughput
- Herd health and welfare
- Meeting market specifications

How to get the manual:

- Hard copy folder plus CD-ROM – \$65 MLA members, \$130 non-members
- CD-ROM only – \$10 MLA members, \$20 non-members
- Download PDFs from www.mla.com.au for free
- Contact MLA on 1800 675 717 and select option 3 or email publications@mla.com.au to order the manual or CD.

