

Maiden heifers under scrutiny

By PENELOPE ARTHUR

WITH the seasons finally working in their favour, Roma Romagnola breeders Matt and Anna Ahern are putting even more pressure on their maiden heifers to perform.

Situated 45km southwest of Roma on the 2874ha Bulala and Veralla aggregation, the Ahern's run 400 Romagnola stud breeders with bulls marketed out of the paddock under the banner of Romagnola Beef Genetics.

Heifers are joined once they reach 300kg, usually around 13-15 months.

In tough seasonal conditions last year, the maiden heifers achieved a pregnancy rate of 65pc while the cow herd achieved a pregnancy rate of 97pc.

While the Aherns say they expect that of the cows, the time has come for the heifers to lift their game.

"Our focus now is to put even more pressure on our heifers and see those figures improve," she said.

"Part of this process will be to tighten our own calving window back to three months and aim to have all calves on the ground before Christmas".

"This will give our heifers the best chance to conceive when they are joined in January as they will have reached sexual maturity."

All progeny are subjected to heavy culling pressure in their early years on Bulala.

Ms Ahern said the first culling point is branding, where any male or female calves that have an obvious structural fault or temperament issue receive a coloured ear tag and will be later culled.

"We also put heavy pressure on them at weaning – again for temperament, doing ability and overall quality and then again as yearlings," she said.

"By the time our heifers see a bull they have had a lot of scrutiny for quality purposes."

The Aherns join for three months from November and preg test three months after the bulls are removed.

All females are given access to a dry lick from Rural Supplements at Rockhampton while lactating.

A paddock rotational system has been introduced to better utilise feed once the bulls are removed and breeders can be grouped together into larger mobs.

Ms Ahern said they had been joining yearling heifers since they introduced Romagnola genetics to the herd in 1991 and have seen significant



Matt and Anna Ahern say you can't exaggerate the importance of females in a stud operation.

gains in fertility as a result.

"We cull very heavily before they are joined so by the time the bulls go in it's only the very best quality heifers left," she said.

"Basically this ensures our most efficient females rise to the top and they have to be a pretty good female to be in our herd.

"We believe joining heifers at this age ensures we get the most out of females as possible."

Older cows are culled at 11 years and will be approaching 12 years of age when they are finished on oats.

"We found we could do that with the Romagnolas because of their

excellent udder structure and fertility," Ms Ahern said.

"The genetics of our herd is improving all the time so there comes a time for those older cows to go."

The Aherns use 11 full blood sires in the Bulala herd in conjunction with an AI and embryo program for 30 elite cows.

They have used bulls from other Australian Romagnola breeders over the years but say it has been their use of genetics imported from Italy that has produced the biggest genetic gain in the herd.

Ms Ahern said the aim was to select the best Romagnola females from

herds in Italy and bring those genetics home to Australia.

"It is important that if we are using a genetic line that we see the progeny from those cows before we buy embryos or semen," she said.

"We have been importing genetics from Italy for over 15 years and this year we had a drop of calves in March from embryos that we purchased in 2007. That was hugely exciting for us and those calves are developing as we would expect – they represent the leading Romagnola genetics in the world and we expect to use those bulls in our own herd.

"That kind of genetic diversity is

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extremely valuable in a herd and we firmly believe that genetic diversity is the key to maintaining performance."

The Aherns believe it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of female lines in a stud operation. When looking for potential sires, Ms Ahern said they always look to their females.

"We are only really working out how good a female is once she is seven or eight years old and has five or six calves on the ground and it is at that point that we will pick her out to enter an AI or ET program and it's from those progeny that we choose our own bulls," she said.

"Ultimately our bull breeding program is a by-product of what we believe is a very functional, quality breeding herd.

"Fertility is the trait with the single most influence on the profitability of a beef enterprise. A lot of our clients are putting pressure on their own breeding herds to produce the goods so they are looking for bulls that are produced from efficient breeding herds that are managed the same way."

Romagnola Beef Genetics will offer about 70 bulls for sale out of the paddock this year. All sale bulls are semen and morphology tested to provide further assurance to buyers on their fertility credentials.

With clients extending from Victoria to the Gulf, the Aherns are excited to see bulls bred under their strict conditions in Roma performing in herds across eastern Australia.

"At the moment the majority of our bulls are going over either Bos indicus based high Brahman content herds or the more traditional British herds in the south and they are performing equally over both," she said. "We enjoy receiving constructive feedback from our clients and to see our bulls performing well for them. It is this feedback that helps us improve what we are doing and is an important part of the way we do business."

ROMAGNOLA

Beef Genetics

Our Ladies



THE STRENGTH BEHIND OUR HERD

Matt and Anna Ahern, "Bulala" ROMA QLD 4455 Tel: 07 4622 5212 www.romagnolabeefgenetics.com.au