

Beefing up production

With 180,000 cattle fed and sold each year, Mort & Co is Australia's largest private feedlot business.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

On a warm February afternoon on the Darling Downs, Scott McDouall runs a handful of steam-flaked grain between his fingers. Nearby, a front-end loader scoops a bucket of feed from a batch box and drops it into a purpose-built mixing truck. “Our big focus here is on feed conversion efficiency,” says Scott, above the roar of machinery and the murmur of 43,000 cattle waiting for their afternoon ration. “That’s the profit driver of our business.”

Meat and livestock general manager for Mort & Co, Scott oversees the operation of Australia’s largest privately owned lot feeding business, including the company’s flagship Grassdale facility. Forty kilometres south of Dalby, Grassdale is an industry leader in efficiency. Behind Scott, the silos of a state-of-the-art steam-flaking mill are a case in point. “The steam-flaking process makes the starches in the grain more easily digestible and makes as much energy available in that grain as possible,” explains feedlot manager Jordan Peach.

Although the exact mix is tweaked daily for each pen, most cattle here will chomp down a ration consisting of 75 per cent grain – predominantly wheat or barley – with roughage content of cereal straw, lucerne hay, white cottonseed, cottonseed hulls, cottonseed meats and silage. Vegetable oil and molasses-based supplements round out the mix. “That gives them all the nutrients they need to stay fit and healthy, and it gives them the calorie intake so they can put beef on,” Jordan says. Finisher animals – those on feed for 20 days or more – will consume about 14 kilograms of feed to achieve a target weight gain of 2.3kg per day.

As lines of brown and black cattle bury their heads in long cement feeder troughs, Jordan explains another of Grassdale’s industry-leading technologies, a \$5 million cotton dehulling plant. “Feedlots have always traditionally fed cottonseed in its whole form,” he says. “But the dehulling plant takes the whole cottonseed and runs it through a mill to crack the cottonseed open and separate the kernel from the hull.” While the kernels, or ‘meat’, provides another source of energy, protein and fat, the hulls add fibre to the ration.

Over at Grassdale’s induction yards, where a pneumatic drafting facility ensures minimal animal stress, Scott

explains the importance of animal welfare to Mort & Co’s operations. “You won’t get industry-leading performance unless you’ve got industry-leading welfare and health,” Scott says, explaining how the company works closely with top veterinarians and animal nutritionists. “We want to make sure that every animal that comes through has the opportunity to reach its genetic potential.”

Back at Toowoomba, Charlie Mort is cooking a barbecue. As the hot plate sizzles with beef steaks, the 49 year old explains how his family ties with rural business date back to 1843, when his great-great-uncle, Thomas Sucliff Mort, established a Sydney wool broking business. Also known as Mort & Co, that business later merged with R Goldsbrough & Co, then Elder Smith & Co, then Henry Jones IXL, eventually becoming Elders.

After growing up on the family’s cattle and cropping property, Franklyn Vale, near Laidley, Charlie attended Gatton College before starting work for Richard and Dyan Hughes’ Wentworth Cattle Co. “They basically said I was wasted on the property and they helped me get a job with Primac,” Charlie says. “I think that’s because I wasn’t a very good jackaroo.”

Charlie worked with Primac for eight years, including three as head of feedlotting operations. When Elders purchased the business in 1997, Charlie was told to reapply for his job. He decided to go out on his own.

Two decades later Mort & Co turns over around \$250 million annually. In addition to Grassdale, the company operates the 6200-head Pinegrove feedlot, at Millmerran, and the 10,000-head Gunnee facility at Delungra, NSW, with a total licensed capacity of 89,000 head.

The company’s cattle consumes 220,000 tonnes of commodities each year, its fleet of trucks moves 3500 cattle in and 3500 cattle out every week, along with liquid and bulk commodities, and its farming operations crop 4250 hectares of the company’s total 9450 hectares. Finished product includes 60–70-day grain-fed trade cattle, 100-day short-fed animals, 150-day mid-fed animals and grain-assisted cattle from backgrounding paddocks.

The company recently launched its Phoenix Beef suite of brands to capitalise on the growing demand for branded beef, including a free-range, grain-finished product and a 400-day grain-fed Wagyu offering. 🐄



TOP: Rations are predominately steam-flaked wheat and barley. ABOVE: Mort & Co founder Charlie Mort and meat and livestock general manager Scott McDouall at Grassdale.