



Small Landholder Series

Owning cattle on a small property

By the Small Landholder Information Service

The following Farmnote highlights the key considerations for small landholders looking at establishing their own small herd of cattle.

Many small landholders are keen to fulfil the dream of a rural lifestyle by taking the leap into livestock ownership. Running a small number of cattle is an appealing prospect for many small landholders. But while cattle can be both personally and financially rewarding, it is wise to investigate the responsibilities of ownership before taking the plunge.

Answering a few key questions will help determine whether such a purchase is a sound investment in both time and money. These preliminary investigations cover the issues of the motivation behind the purchase (for example, pasture management, financial gain or personal pleasure) whether you have the knowledge, skills, infrastructure and feed to ensure the wellbeing of your stock, and the time to care for your cattle. If, after carrying out these investigations, you want to go ahead with the purchase you need to decide on the type of cattle, where to source them and how you will transport the cattle to your landholding.

What are my motivations?

The reasons behind your decision to invest in cattle will determine the number, breed, age and gender of animals you purchase.

If, for example you simply wish to have a few cattle to control pastures on your smallholding and supply occasional meat for your family without wanting to breed additional animals, a small herd of steers of an easily-maintained beef-producing breed such as poll Hereford or Angus could suffice. If however you wanted to run and breed your own self-replacing herd of animals you may investigate a small niche breed such as Dexter or Belted Galloway.

If commercial gain is your motivation, keep in mind that this will take considerable time, money and knowledge for optimal production.

If you simply like the idea of having a few cattle to control pastures and don't want to sell or slaughter the animals for meat, alternative pasture species or a ride-on mower or slasher may be a more economical and less time-consuming option.



Figure 1: Crossbreed cattle are suitable for landholders looking for a source of homegrown beef.

Knowledge and skills

After the decision has been made that cattle are a suitable option, there are a few basic areas of knowledge and skills that are required for responsible management of your livestock.

While it can be argued that cattle are a less time consuming option than sheep, they still require you to regularly monitor feed, water supplies and general animal wellbeing, and depending on the age and **class** of stock you may need to drench, vaccinate, mark (castrate) and wean calves.

If you do not have skills in these areas you will need to develop them or employ the services of someone who has.

Take some time to research basic cattle care information on the DAFWA website www.agric.wa.gov.au where there a number of Farmnotes and some useful references.

The DAFWA Small Landholder Information Service (SLIS) runs livestock care and many other workshops (contact small_landholder@agric.wa.gov.au for more information and talk to as many people as you can who are in the industry and have "been there" before).

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Infrastructure

Cattle need a well-fenced environment with adequate supplies of safe feed, water and shelter. For efficient grazing management you may need to fence off a number of smaller paddocks within the boundaries of the property to enable **rotational grazing**. This allows paddocks to be free of livestock from time to time and the pastures to recover before re-grazing. The number and size of these paddocks will be dictated by the local climate, property soil types, pasture species and the number of cattle you intend to run over a given area (**stocking rate**).

Developing a clear property plan before acquiring your stock is essential. Information on property planning is available on the small landholders website listed at the end of this Farmnote. Property planning workshops with access to professional advice are also available through the DAFWA service.

In addition to general fencing, a set of sturdy cattleyards, in which to carry out stock handling activities such as drenching, vaccinating and marking, is essential. These yards also will provide a contained area when stock arrive on the property after purchase and prepare to leave the property if they are sold. Cattleyards also provide a safe area to contain weaned calves if you decide to breed from your herd.

Your local rural outlet (for example Landmark agent) can advise you on available yards or you can contact individual yard manufacturers for more information.

Feed requirements

Establishing a quality pasture is essential to ensure your cattle remain healthy. Suitable pasture species and pasture management will vary with climate and soil type

Grazing management and **stocking rates** will depend on the season, number, size and **class** of your cattle (for example pregnant or lactating cows have a greater feed requirement than **dry cows** or steers).

As a general guide, smaller animals require less food space than larger animals. However if you are considering breeding, pregnant and lactating animals will require more food and land than dry animals.

The ability to irrigate may increase your paddocks' carrying capacity.

For more information on stocking rates download *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Rural Small Landholders* from www.agric.wa.gov.au.

In addition to determining the carrying capacity of your property during an average year, consider what will happen in dry seasons or years. Outside of the main pasture growing season, or during drought, you may need to supplementary feed your cattle. Seek advice from your local livestock officer or veterinarian before buying or supplying stock with supplementary feed to ensure you choose the most suitable feeds and quantities for your stock.

Further information on feeding livestock is available from the DAFWA website www.agric.wa.gov.au



Figure 2: A set of sturdy cattleyards is a must for routine handling operations.



Figure 3: Using the services of an experienced stock agent will ensure you get healthy stock and value for money.

Choosing your cattle

Having decided that you can care for cattle you now need to investigate what type of cattle will suit your needs. This will be determined by your motivations for owning cattle as already discussed.

If your cattle will be used to manage pastures and supply meat then the most economical option may be to select a general purpose purebred or crossbred beef breed, which are best found through the saleyards or direct from a local beef producer.

If you choose to run a herd of a specific breed then it would be wise to contact the relevant breed association and discuss with them your options. For the inexperienced cattle owner, the ongoing support, training opportunities and information available from breed associations can be worthwhile.

Attending agricultural field days and shows is another way of investigating individual breeds that may appeal to you and will provide an opportunity to chat with a range of breeders who can outline the benefits and challenges associated with individual breeds.

One consideration when selecting a breed is whether you buy a polled (hornless) or horned breed. For inexperienced operators, polled breeds are easier and safer to handle. If you do choose a horned breed it is advisable to employ the services of an experienced operator or veterinarian who can safely and humanely remove the developing horns of young animals.

Buying your cattle

The purchase of your cattle will be somewhat determined by the breed you have chosen. General-purpose beef breeds are easily obtained through the local saleyards or direct from a local beef producer. With the help of a local livestock agent you can ensure you will get value for money and healthy stock.

Specialist pure breeds may be best purchased directly from breeders. Breed associations should be able to put you in contact with a reputable breeder in your area where possible. If you are unsure about what constitutes a suitable healthy animal, you would be well advised to do more homework before making a purchase.

Animal identification and movement

Before transferring any cattle to your ownership or care, you need to have a Property Identification Code (PIC) and current brand registration for your property. Each animal needs to be identified by earmark or brand (ear tattoo for registered stud animals) and have an electronic NLIS device (ear tag or rumen bolus). You should not take possession of cattle which do not have these identifiers. If you intend to breed cattle, you will need to purchase the appropriate tags and applicators.

Cattle across Australia are required by law to comply with the National Livestock Identification System (NLIS). This is permanent, whole-of-life identification that enables animals to be tracked from property of birth to slaughter. You need to notify the NLIS database within 48 hours of taking possession that the cattle are now located on your property. It is your responsibility as the receiver of the stock to make sure the transfer is done, however you can ask the livestock agent, a third party scanning contractor or anyone with access to the national NLIS database to do on your behalf. Scanners are available for hire from many telecentres if you would like to do it yourself. Cattle purchased from a saleyard will be transferred for you.

If you sell cattle, you will need to ensure each animal has an NLIS electronic ear tag or rumen bolus before you move them off your property. For more information, visit www.agric.wa.gov.au and search for "NLIS cattle".

Any cattle being moved off property must be accompanied by a waybill or a national vendor declaration (NVD) waybill, which can be purchased from Meat and Livestock Australia. For more information visit www.mla.com.au or freecall 1800 683 111 and select option 2.



Figure 4: Angus cow, correctly tagged and compliant with the National Livestock Identification System

