Case Study

IMPROVING HAY QUALITY AND GRAZING MANAGEMENT AT BELVEDERE VALLEY ENTERPRISES

South West NRM

Farm Background

Belvedere Valley Enterprises farms approximately 260 acres in Western Australia's Southern Forests region. The business runs a 100% grass-fed and grass-finished Wagyu beef enterprise built around regenerative agriculture principles.

According to third generation farmer Rylee Bennett, who recently stepped into the business with her parents:

"Everything we do is centred around soil health, animal welfare and producing nutrient-dense beef in a way that regenerates the landscape rather than depleting it."

The farm faces several environmental challenges, including acidic soils with elevated aluminium levels and long, dry summers that restrict pasture growth.

Rylee explained:

"Summer was always a pressure point. The summers are dry, and pasture growth just drops off completely. It felt like we were always one hot week away from running short of feed."

HAY PRODUCTION SYSTEM – WHY THE FARM CHOSE HAY

Belvedere Valley produces hay rather than silage as part of its feed conservation strategy.

Rylee said environmental considerations strongly shaped their choice:

"We chose hay because it better matched our resources and values. Compared with silage, the plastic use and broader environmental impacts made hay the better option for us."

Inspiration for Change

Rylee credits much of her interest in regenerative agriculture and improved forage management to educational resources that challenged conventional farming approaches.

"I think my inspiration and where I truly knew this was my purpose was when I first watched the documentary Kiss the Ground. That's where I was like, 'Okay, I want to do things differently'."

This interest encouraged her to become more involved in the farm and seek additional learning opportunities through programs such as the Grazing Matcher program and Hay and Silage workshops, facilitated by Western Beef Association with support from South West NRM .[1]

[1] Grazing Matcher – South West NRM. (2025, April 24). South West NRM. https://southwestnrm.org.au/project/grazing-matcher/

Feed Testing: A Major Turning Point

One of the most significant outcomes from participating in Grazing Matcher and Hay and Silage workshops was the adoption of feed testing.

Previously, the farm had never routinely analysed its conserved fodder. A lot of assumptions were made in determining the feeding regimes.

Rylee reflected:

"We never really did feed testing before. The results changed the way we view supplementary feeding," she said.

"We've learnt a lot from it. We can now work out whether our cows will lose weight, maintain weight or gain weight because we have the feed test results."

Feed testing is widely recognised as an essential management tool because it provides objective information on crude protein, digestibility, metabolisable energy and dry matter content, allowing producers to match feed quality with livestock requirements according to different physiological statuses and growth stages.

Rylee also pointed out an important lesson for producers purchasing hay:

"A seller might tell you their hay is high quality, and it may look good, but the protein and dry matter can still be quite low. That's why testing is so important."

Improved Hay-Making Practices

FOCUSING ON QUALITY RATHER THAN QUANTITY

One of the most valuable lessons was understanding the relationship between plant maturity and forage quality.

Rylee clarified:

"The biggest shift has been cutting earlier and focusing on quality over bulk."

Rather than waiting for maximum pasture growth, the family now monitors plant development closely.

"We're paying attention to plant growth stages and weather windows."

This approach aligns with fodder conservation research showing that harvesting forage at earlier growth stages generally improves digestibility and nutritional value.

"We don't really cut by the calendar anymore. We cut by plant maturity, leaf stage and what the grass looks like."

"If we wait for bulk, we'll lose quality. Now quality is the priority because quality carries cattle through summer."

This reflects one of the central messages promoted through Grazing Matcher training – livestock performance is driven more by feed quality than by the volume of conserved forage alone.

For pasture, any reduction in hay yield from cutting earlier is balanced out improved regrowth, especially if cut at the recommended 7 cm above ground level.

Grazing Management

ROTATIONAL GRAZING SYSTEM

Hay production starts with good grazing management that promotes pasture growth. Belvedere Valley has adopted a structured rotational grazing system based on principles promoted through Grazing Matcher.

The farm currently operates:

- A 35-day grazing rotation
- Two separate cattle mobs
- Daily stock movements
- Smaller grazing cells through subdivision

Rylee described the system:

The 35-day rotation is a rule of thumb for grazing ryegrass. It means whatever the time of year, plant tillers have time to regenerate 2-3 new leaves. This is critical because grazing plants with fewer than two leaves is likely to stunt growth.

Ryegrass uses sugar reserves to recover from grazing. After two leaves have grown, reserves have been replenished, allowing the third leaf to grow bigger, and energy to be used for root growth and tiller expansion.

Other pastures are similar, although the recommended number of leaves for phalaris and cocksfoot before grazing is four.

Is Hay-Making Worth the Investment?

The changes implemented following Grazing Matcher and Hay and Silage workshops have already delivered measurable benefits.

According to Rylee:

"Our cattle have held their condition so much better and we're not fighting weight loss all summer."

She also noticed improvements in overall herd consistency:

"They come in healthier and more consistent, so it takes a lot of pressure off us, the animals and the land."

Conclusion

Belvedere Valley Enterprises demonstrates how practical training and evidence-based management can improve feed security and livestock performance. Through the adoption of feed testing, earlier cutting decisions, and rotational grazing strategies, the Bennett family has strengthened the resilience of their grass-fed Wagyu enterprise.

As Rylee summarised:

"We've learnt so much. Things we had no idea about before are now things we're already implementing."

For more assistance, see the South West NRM YouTube Channel for videos on how to make hay and silage and conduct feed testing: https://www.youtube.com/@southwestnrm/videos

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