

Glen Ruth ready for GeneSTAR revolution

It is inevitable that GeneSTAR® tender beef will soon reach the consumer level, according to leading northern cattleman Rob Atkinson.

“Once that happens, the technology will really take off,” he said.

Mr Atkinson got in on the ground floor and has been steadily infusing tenderness genetics through his commercial and stud Droughtmaster herds for more than four years.

As numbers of tenderness-tested cattle increase, Mr Atkinson said it was only a matter of time before GeneSTAR was promoted on a branded beef product in the retail market.

“We had an order last year for three decks of steers testing 5 Star or better for tenderness,” said Mr Atkinson, who with his wife Donna and children Amy and John run one of the breed’s foundation studs, Glen Ruth.

Rob’s grandfather Monty Atkinson was a pioneering breeder who introduced Zebu bulls in crossbreeding programs to transform the northern beef industry.

Some of the first Droughtmaster cattle evolved on the original Mount Ruth property in the headwaters of the Herbert River south of Mt Garnet in the 1950s.

Rob and his family have preserved the historic stud prefix and are continuing innovation on Katandra, a 40,500 hectare property about 100 km southwest of Hughenden.

Katandra has a herd of about 1750 commercial breeders and the registered stud which has about 200 breeders.

Katandra’s major bull marketing outlet is the joint Monty Atkinson

Genetics or MAGS sale held in Charters Towers each November.

Mr Atkinson embraced GeneSTAR technology when it first came on the market.

“It’s a tool for measuring beef tenderness and we have to have regard for eating quality. The beef industry has to have a good product to win ground in the protein market.”

“It provides a pretty accurate measure of eating quality,” said Mr Atkinson, who has personally put GeneSTAR to the taste test.

“I like to think I am a bit of a steak connoisseur and when we have an animal slaughtered for our own consumption now it has to test at least 5 Star for tenderness.”

“In the past, I’ve eaten tough steak from an untested beast and sent a smear away for DNA testing just to prove to myself that it works,” he said.

Mr Atkinson routinely tests all the bulls used in his commercial and stud herds and also provides GeneSTAR test results on animals in the annual MAGS catalogue.

“In a way it’s easier with the commercial herd because we have control, breeding our own bulls. You can’t always buy GeneSTAR-tested stud animals. We tell other breeders it is a pity they are not testing. When we get the results back on a stud animal sometimes we are disappointed and sometimes we are pleasantly surprised.

“In our commercial herd, we are using 50 to 60 bulls and the baseline is a 5 Star test result. We have an 8 Star bull working in the paddock now and he is pretty precious. The



ROB ATKINSON

tenderness rating of our herd is increasing over time. It’s getting easier to find a 5 Star bull now.”

Mr Atkinson said he plans to test selected heifers from the commercial bull breeding herd, looking for 8 Star females to ET.

“We are already doing ET with our registered cattle so it would not be hard to extend it to the top end of the commercial herd to speed up the infusion of tenderness genetics.”

Mr Atkinson is taking part in the Flinders Beef Challenge, a trial comparing GeneSTAR-tested cattle from 17 beef producers in the Hughenden region.

Each producer supplied seven steers agisted in a single herd on Katandra with the worst performing animal dropped after six months. Half have now been sent to a feedlot for 100 days of grain finishing and they are all due for slaughter in September.

“There will be a lot of interest when we get the carcass results back,” Mr Atkinson said.

“One pure red Brahman had an 8 Star tenderness test and we are keeping that animal for a taste test at our presentation dinner in Hughenden in October,” Mr Atkinson said.