



An Australian Government Initiative



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*Australia*

## MID NORTH COAST

# Media release

## Saving Norfolk Island's iconic cattle population

31 October 2024

If you've ever visited Norfolk Island, you'll have marvelled at its free-ranging cows – grazing on rolling green pastures and wandering roads untended. It has been this way for more than 200 years.

Since a 2015 legislation change, however, the island has been faced with biosecurity limits that preclude the importation of live cattle, sheep and goats. This has had a significant impact on the island's agriculture industry with fresh genetics not readily available.

The decline in production of cattle and sheep has seen the island import more meat from Australia and reduced its residents' ability to support their needs. Further, the cost of beef and lamb has skyrocketed, and the visible evidence of inbreeding has been alarming.

Given this critical situation, Regional Development Australia Mid North Coast (RDAMNC) and Norfolk Island engaged with the Norfolk Island Cattle Association, the Federal Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, Breeder Genetics, Angus Australia, Holbrook Breeders Australia and the Norfolk Island Regional Council to facilitate the development of an **Assisted Reproductive Program (ARP)** for the cattle population on Norfolk Island.

Federal government funding in mid-2024 made it possible to secure the services of world-class technicians who assessed the situation and provided a report on the visible signs of inbreeding - including decreasing carcass weights. They then conducted workshops with local farmers to help plan and prepare for the ARP, source the genetic material and conduct the insemination process.

Quotes attributable to Federal Minister for Territories, Kristy McBain MP:

"Cattle have long been of great importance to the Norfolk Island community, not only for its food security and economy, but also as a significant part of Norfolk Islanders' cultural identity and heritage.

“This is something we need to safeguard, which is why we’re providing the Regional Development Australia with \$50,000 towards this critical program, which will improve the genetic diversity of Norfolk Island’s cattle and have lasting benefits in the community.

In June 2024, the first stage of the embryo transfer and artificial insemination program began – 40+ cows received an embryo transfer and 30 cows were artificially inseminated.

Back on Norfolk Island for the second round of insemination in September, project partners Holbrook Breeders Australia shared the fantastic news of positive pregnancies – 65% success rate for embryo transfers and 40% for artificial insemination. An outstanding result for Norfolk Island.

To highlight the cost discrepancies and the impact of Norfolk Island not having healthy cattle and sheep industries to work towards self-sufficiency, or at the least reduce the reliance on imports, below are some examples of the pricing differences between related products. It should also be noted that other animals (for example, chickens) are not produced for meat on Norfolk as the cost of importing feed makes it cost prohibitive and there is 100% reliance on imports.

	Australia	Norfolk Island
<b>Milk (Fresh)</b>	\$2.80 per litre	\$11.31 per litre
<b>Milk (Long life)</b>	\$1.60 per litre	\$3.80 per litre
<b>Rump Steak</b>	\$20.00 per kg	\$28.99 per kg
<b>Lamb Loin Chops</b>	\$28.00 per kg	\$29.99 per kg
<b>Chicken breast</b>	\$11.00 per kg	\$24.99 per kg

RDAMNC received a Special Commendation at the Regional Development Australia National Forum Awards Ceremony for facilitating the project on 28 October 2024. This award recognised the material impact the initiative has had for Norfolk Islanders and the industry prosperity.

## The future

If the program is successful, there will be a celebration of calves born on Norfolk Island in March 2025; the first step in rebuilding the local industry. To secure its future, it’s critical the program continues in the coming years.

RDAMNC’s CEO, Dr Madeleine Lawler stated that “the success of this program will really make a significant economic, social, cultural and environmental contribution not only to the cattle producers and their families but also to the broader community on Norfolk Island. We are thrilled to see the project get this far; we have our fingers crossed that we are able to meet some beautiful new calves in March 2025. This is a fantastic example of community, not-for-profit, government and commercial entities working together to achieve positive outcomes for remote and vulnerable communities.”



## Sheep population is also at risk

The sheep on Norfolk Island are also in a critical state with only 40 (approx.) left on the island.

RDAMNC has developed strong relationships with key Australian breeders in Australia to work towards an ARP for the industry on Norfolk Island. There are more complexities, but we hope it is possible to refresh the genetics and future supply of lamb on the island.

### **Jack Laurie – Director & Founder, Breeder Genetics**

“A dire state of inbreeding and an overall lack of genetic diversity were dramatically hindering beef production on Norfolk Island. Urgent assistance and funding were required to initiate this project. Regular and sustained efforts will be necessary to maintain herd recovery and sustain a population where inbreeding is minimised. Through continued embryo transfer and artificial insemination programs, we can take significant steps towards ensuring the future prosperity of the beef industry on Norfolk Island.”

### **PJ Wilson, Vice President, Norfolk Island Cattle Association**

“If you have ever been to Norfolk Island you would know that cattle are a huge part of our way of life here on the island. The cattle roam freely on the streets and dominate the landscape. Local families also rely heavily on the cattle here as an affordable food source. The industry is a vital part of the island’s economy supplying families, local butchers and restaurants.

We have always managed inbreeding issues through the importation of live bulls. Following the ban of live ruminants to the island in 2015 which became effective in 2016, the industry has faced a bleak future. In my herd the effects of inbreeding are already evident through reduced carcass weight and quality, birth defects and genetic abnormalities.

The outcome of this should see enough genetic diversity to sustain the island for years to come and allow us to rebuild the industry.”

### **Dr Stuart Geard, Owner & Director, Holbrook Breeders**

“Our recent project in Norfolk Island fulfilled a decade long dream for the people of Norfolk Island. With the gene pool narrowing because of the cessation of live cattle imports, action was required to support the Islands cattle herd and bring genetic diversity. On our export breeding centre in Holbrook, we flushed embryos from multiple breeds including Poll Hereford, Simmental, Speckle Park and Angus. Semen was also gathered and together with the embryos flown to Norfolk Island.

The Norfolk cattle herd is a blend of many breeds, including traditional Simmental, Herefords, Angus and the native Norfolk Blue. Although the herd would best be described as a league of nations, they seemed to be structurally and functionally corrected with exceptional temperament.

I was impressed with the Norfolk cattle producer’s eagerness and desire to improve their herd and embrace new technologies including embryo transfer and artificial insemination. Their willingness to ask questions and learn was terrific.

The producers did a great job in programming up the cattle for either embryo transfer or artificial insemination. During the first round we were able to implant all the embryos we exported and 100% of the cows enrolled in the program came on heat and were inseminated.

The initial assessment of the project has been extremely positive, we now wait for happy and healthy calves to hit the ground.”

**Simon Bigg, Norfolk Island Cattle Farmer**

“Not having access to new genetics has caused a decline in quality and yield and a once sought after premium local beef product is now struggling to compete with imported beef.

The introduction of land rates and increasing cost of pasturage rights (roadside grazing) has heavily impacted the oldest industry on the island. A return once used to maintain pastures and fencing and feed families has diminished and with many changes in legislation since 2015, one of these has prevented us from importing live ruminants, sending the future of the Norfolk Island beef industry through the roof.

RDA has assisted our industry with grant funding to install infrastructure to transport and store imported semen.

Early signs in recipients are giving producers confidence as we await the results. The funding and support provided by all involved has been very warmly received by producers on the island. There is now potential to restock the Norfolk Island herds with new genetics and while a return on this investment is a few years away, there is a spring in the step of the islands beef producers.”

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