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**Considerations of Feed Demand and Supply for the Evolution  
and Expansion of Beef Cattle Farming in Sabah,  
East Malaysia**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in Agronomy



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**2017**



## Abstract

To develop a plan for the expansion and evolution of the beef industry in Sabah, it was decided to apply relevant farming information and technology from New Zealand pastoral systems. Based on expert recommendation in New Zealand, metabolic energy budgeting (MEB) was chosen as the vehicle for technology transfer, rather than a direct translocation of elements of farm practice between these two countries of vastly different climate. In Phase 1 of the study, farm system evolution in New Zealand over the last two and half decades was evaluated by modelling past systems from historic records for the author to gain experience of New Zealand pastoral systems and to develop MEB spreadsheet tools to identify principles of system improvement; and in Phase 2, the tools developed in New Zealand were applied for evaluation of opportunities for farm system improvement in Sabah.

In Phase 1, an evaluation was carried out of cumulative changes on New Zealand lower North Island sheep and beef cattle farms from 1980–81/1985–86 to 2010–2011. Herbage harvested on the farms studied, as determined by MEB, was 7.43 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> in 1980–81 and only 5.76 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> in 2010–11. Also herbage supply (based on GROW model calculations using weather data) had decreased from 9.64 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> to 8.70 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> (partly due to an apparent climate change effect). However, with the evolution of farm system configurations over the past quarter century focusing on efficiency gain, the feed conversion efficiency (based on national data) improved from 25 kg feed consumed per kg lamb weaned in 1980–81/1985–86 to 19 kg feed consumed per kg lamb weaned in 2010/2011 and the corresponding increases in meat production from 1980–81/1985–86 to 2010/2011 were a rise from 137 kg to 147 kg total beef and lamb carcass per ha per year. Two major drivers of the higher meat production were an increase in lambing percentage, and an increase in weight of lambs and bulls at sale.

In Phase 2, a first study in Sabah using the MEB tools developed in New Zealand involved three cut-and-carry feedlots (Brahman, Bali and Droughtmaster cattle), and utilised 5,981 monthly liveweight records of 485 cattle farmed in this system for the period 2008–2013. A second study in Sabah involved five grazing units (Brahman cow-calf, Bali cow-calf, Droughtmaster cow-calf, and Heifer and Brahman bull Units), and included 30,166 monthly liveweight records for 1353 cattle farmed in this system during the same period. A third study involved three oil-palm-integrated cattle (OPIC) farms (two in 9 yr old plantations and one in a 12 yr old plantation) and 600–700 cattle farmed in this system in 2013 and 2014. In this study, animal growth rates were assumed based on records from the nearest government farm with

animals of similar breed. For the three systems, herbage-cutting experiments were carried out in August–October 2014 to estimate herbage growth and nutritive value (metabolisable energy and protein contents), and soil samples collected to describe the soil nutrient content. In the cut-and-carry feedlot and grazing cattle farming systems, the herbage harvested, as indicated by the modelling in these systems, was lower (3.74–7.16 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> herbage eaten) than the potential yield of the herbage extrapolated from the cutting experiments (6.9–21.3 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>). In the OPIC farming system, the modelled herbage harvested in 9 yr old plantations was 2.0–2.4 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> and that of 12 yr old plantation was 1.4–1.7 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>. These values are higher than values for potential herbage supply (0.4–0.8 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>) reported in literature for plantations of similar ages. In all three systems, herbage nutritive value was low (7.0–8.9 MJ ME kg DM<sup>-1</sup>; 9%–14% CP), calving percentage was low (33%–47%); soil was acidic and soil nutrient content was low; while invasion of non-sown species (native grass) was high. The best average feed conversion efficiencies (FCE) for these systems were 21.3 kg DM kg LWG<sup>-1</sup> (cut-and-carry feedlot), 40.2 kg DM kg LWG<sup>-1</sup> (grazing), and 32.2 kg DM kg LWG<sup>-1</sup> (OPIC). FCE was found to improve with application of N fertiliser and was not necessarily high when feed consumption was intensified (or at high system feed demand). A key statistic defining the stock-configuration in an efficient system for the cut-and-carry feedlot cattle farming system was 994 kg animal LWT ha<sup>-1</sup>, or a comparative stocking rate (CSR) of 96 kg animal liveweight per tonne feed consumed. For the grazing cattle farming system, the observed optimum was 506 kg animal LWT ha<sup>-1</sup>, or a CSR of 94 kg LWT t DM<sup>-1</sup>. The identification of an optimal CSR for the OPIC farming system was limited (by the data supplied by the farms), but the available data indicated that for 9OP1 the CSR was 89 kg LWT t DM<sup>-1</sup>, or approximately 231 kg animal LWT ha<sup>-1</sup>.

From the series of studies in Sabah, it is concluded that the future focus of the beef industry to expand and improve the productivity should be first to adjust the farm system configuration especially the stocking rate for optimal FCE under the present forage supply regime (and for that purpose a-CSR type of statistics would be useful to determine the appropriate stocking rate), and only then, to develop a pasture husbandry and fertiliser recommendations aimed at improving herbage dry matter harvested towards a target of 14–20 t DM ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup>, with ME of 9–10 MJ kg DM<sup>-1</sup>, and CP of 14%–16% at harvesting or grazing. The herbage production target for the OPIC farming system, however, cannot be determined until the time trajectory of the decreasing system herbage productivity with decreasing oil palm age is fully understood. The use of supplement in the three systems is optional, but if it is used, it should be targeted tactically to reduce liveweight loss and enhance cow reproductive performance.

## Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Professor Dr. Cory Matthew, in the Institute of Agriculture and Environment, my main supervisor, for his insightful guidance and advice, which helped me to fine tune my research skills and understanding of farming systems, for funding and arranging the trips to study three farms in New Zealand and for his dedication and friendship to help me beyond the official working hours. I would also like to thank Professor Dr. Stephen T. Morris, in the Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences, my associate supervisor, for his astute suggestions and advice. I also thank them for securing the funding to cover the airfare to Sabah to collect farm data for my study.

I would like to thank the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia for the scholarship to study cattle (and sheep) farming systems in New Zealand.

I would like to thank Datuk Dr. Yeo Boon Kiat, the director of the Department of Veterinary Services and Animal Industry (DVSAI) of Sabah, for the permission to analyse the primary farm data kept by government farms in Sabah for my study. I would also thank Dr. Lorren Adam, Dr. Punimin Abdullah, Ir. Harun Abas, and the late Dr. Mutarin Damshik (DVSAI) for the extra information about beef cattle farming in Sabah especially on government farms, and Sawit Kinabalu Sendirian Berhad (SKSB) in Sabah for sharing information about beef cattle farming in oil palm plantations. My thanks also go to Dave Milne, Bruce and Angela Williams, and Robert and Pat Liverton (New Zealand) for sharing farm records and knowledge about farming activities on their farms for the use in my study.

I would like to thank Tony Rhodes for sharing his knowledge on history of sheep and beef cattle farming in New Zealand, and the New Zealand Grassland Association for the funding to attend the New Zealand grassland conferences in Tauranga (2013), Alexandria (2014) and Masterton (2015), which helped me to learn more about sheep and beef cattle farming in New Zealand.

I would also thank the staff of SPT Tawau, PMLD Semporna, PPT Timbang Menggaris, PPT Wario, and PPT Entilibon (DVSAI) for the assistance in the field.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues for sharing invaluable knowledge and educative information during my PhD study: Dr. Hossein Ghani Zadeh, Dr. Lulu He, Umer Habib, Wei Zhang, Prakash Bista, Mauricio Maldonado and Kim Bourgen (Massey University, New Zealand); Dr. Frisco Nobilly (Lincoln University, New Zealand); Assoc. Prof. Dr. Suzan Benedick, Dr. Jupikely James Silip, Devina David, Rosmah Murdad, Shahida Mohd. Sharif, C.F. Tyng, Dr. L.M. Sam and Assoc. Prof. Dr. M.B. Jalloh (Faculty of Sustainable Agriculture, Universiti Malaysia Sabah); Loinsing Kasang, Safari Stari, Genius Gubal and Yunus Ayup (DVSAI), Dr. Mohd. Azid Kabul and Hasbudie Yacho (SKSB). Thank you also to Harry Benedick and his family in Sabah for the invaluable help and friendship over the past decades. My thanks also go to Denise Stewart (Massey University, New Zealand) for the administrative help during my study and the submission of my thesis.

My wife, Sabrina Sally Wong, endured a fair share of the bumpy trails of the journey that I went through to complete my PhD study. I thank her endlessly for the unconditional love and support. Above all, however, we had a wonderful life while living in New Zealand.



## List of Abbreviations

| Abbreviations     | Descriptions  | Units                              |
|-------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| ADG               | Average Daily Gain  | g hd <sup>-1</sup> d <sup>-1</sup> |
| AFRC              | Agriculture and Food Research Council   |                                    |
| AFZ               | Association Française de Zootechnie   |                                    |
| ARC               | Agriculture Research Council  |                                    |
| Ca                | Calcium   |                                    |
| CIRAD             | Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement |                                    |
| cm                | Centimetre  | cm                                 |
| CP                | Crude protein   | % of kg DM                         |
| CSIRO             | Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation                        |                                    |
| CSR               | Comparative Stocking Rate   |                                    |
| CV                | Coefficient of Variation  | %                                  |
| d                 | Day   |                                    |
| DM                | Dry matter  |                                    |
| DOA               | Department of Agriculture (Sabah)   |                                    |
| DSM               | Department of Statistics (Malaysia)   |                                    |
| DSSM              | Department of Statistics of Sabah Malaysia  |                                    |
| DVS               | Department of Veterinary Services (West Malaysia)                                   |                                    |
| DVSAI             | Department of Veterinary Services and Animal Industries (Sabah)                     |                                    |
| ENSO              | El niño-Southern Oscillation  |                                    |
| FAO               | Food and Agriculture Organisation   |                                    |
| FCE               | Feed conversion efficiency  | kg DM kg LWG <sup>-1</sup>         |
| g                 | Gram  | g                                  |
| ha                | Hectare   | ha                                 |
| hd                | Head  |                                    |
| H <sub>km</sub>   | Horizontal distance walked a day  |                                    |
| INRA              | Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique                                       |                                    |
| K                 | Pottasium   |                                    |
| kg                | Kilogram  | kg                                 |
| k <sub>g</sub>    | Coefficient of use of ME for liveweight gain  |                                    |
| k <sub>l</sub>    | Coefficient of use of ME for lactation  |                                    |
| km                | Kilometre   |                                    |
| k <sub>m</sub>    | Coefficient of use of ME for body maintenance                                       |                                    |
| k <sub>p</sub>    | Coefficient of use of ME for pregnancy  |                                    |
| LWG               | Liveweight gain   | kg d <sup>-1</sup>                 |
| LWL               | Liveweight loss   | kg d <sup>-1</sup>                 |
| LWT               | Liveweight  | kg                                 |
| m <sup>2</sup>    | Square metre  |                                    |
| MAFF              | Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food   |                                    |
| ME or M/D         | Metabolisable energy  | MJ ME kg DM <sup>-1</sup>          |
| MEB               | Metabolic energy budgeting  |                                    |
| ME <sub>LWL</sub> | Mobilised body energy from liveweight loss  | MJ ME d <sup>-1</sup>              |
| meq               | Mili-equivalent   |                                    |
| Mg                | Magnesium   |                                    |
| MJ                | Megajoules  |                                    |
| mm                | Millimetre  | mm                                 |
| mo                | Month   |                                    |
| MPOB              | Malaysian Palm Oil Board  |                                    |
| NASEM             | National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine                           |                                    |
| N                 | Nitrogen  |                                    |
| NEM               | North East Monsoon  |                                    |
| NEMI              | National Enteric Methane Inventory  |                                    |
| NZ                | New Zealand   |                                    |
| °C                | Degree Celsius  |                                    |



|          |  |
|----------|--|
| OP       | Oil palm   |
| OPIC     | Oil Palm Integrated Cattle                                   |
| P        | Phosphorus   |
| <i>P</i> | Statistical probability                                      |
| PKC      | Palm Kernel Cake   |
| PMLD     | Pusat Menternak Lembu Dara (Centre for Heifer Rearing)       |
| ppm      | Parts per million  |
| PPT      | Pusat Pembanyakan Ternakan (Centre for Livestock Production) |
| <i>R</i> | Pearson's correlation coefficient                            |
| RM       | Ringgit Malaysia   |
| SCA      | Standing Committee on Agriculture                            |
| SKSB     | Sawit Kinabalu Sendirian Berhad                              |
| SOA      | Sulphate of Ammonia  |
| SPT      | Stesen Pembiakan Ternakan (Station for Livestock Breeding)   |
| SRW      | Standard Reference Weight                                    |
| SU       | Stock Unit   |
| SWM      | South West Monsoon   |
| t        | Tonne  |
| $V_{km}$ | Vertical distance distance walked per day                    |
| yr       | Year   |

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