

The Nguni crisis – what is really going on?

The Nguni breed faces a problem. Major feedlots are either not accepting weaners or paying significantly less for them. **Heather Dugmore** reports.

Earlier this month, the council of Nguni Cattle Breeders' Society (NCBS) sent an urgent letter to the agriculture minister, Senzeni Zokwana, strongly objecting to the discrimination of feedlots against the South African indigenous breeds of cattle.

The letter reads: "During recent times, weaner calves were imported from Namibia, while local cattle breeds were discriminated against by the feedlots. Penalties for indigenous breeds ranged from R2,00/kg to R5,00/kg. This is posing a serious threat to the sustainability of farming with, and the preservation of, indigenous cattle breeds. Farmers from marginal areas

where only adapted indigenous breeds can be utilised are severely discriminated against. In the light of changing climatic conditions and unknown future challenges as well as the role of adapted breeds to confront possible future scenarios, the preservation of indigenous genetic material should be considered as a strategic advantage beyond any form of compromise."

In the same letter, the NCBS supports the Red Meat Producers' Organisation's (RPO) objection to the suspension of the revised import regulations: "The scaling down of control mechanisms and standards, with complete disregard for the safety and status of

the national herd in favour of the feedlots, needs to be seriously questioned."

Marli Stegmann, president of the NCBS and an Nguni stud breeder in Bandelierkop in Limpopo, says the issues highlighted in the letter "add to the extremely difficult challenges that beef farmers have faced during the past year, including rising production costs, plunging red meat prices and, in some areas, severe drought".

BIASED BEHAVIOUR? Stegmann acknowledges that while one of the most important qualities of a farmer is to be an adaptable

businessperson, the major feedlots – which are price-cutting on Nguni weaners – are simply exploiting Nguni cattle farmers.

"When we ask the major feedlots, such as Karan Beef [the largest feedlot in the country, with a 35% market share] why their agents suddenly announce price drops or that they're not accepting Nguni weaners from certain provinces and then just as suddenly accept them again when it suits them, we get a different answer every time," she says.

Stegmann explains that while beef farmers

BELOW: A Simmentaler bull with a pure-bred Nguni cow and Simmentaler x Nguni calves on Marli Stegmann's farm. Stegmann, president of the NCBS, denies that cross-breeding with Nguni females will destroy the breed. PHOTOS: HEATHER DUGMORE





The other side: Jannie Botha, GM Karan Beef feedlot



JANNIE BOTHA



MARLI STEGMANN

ABOVE:

A six-and-a-half-month-old Simmentaler x Nguni calf with its Nguni mother. Marli Stegmann encourages Nguni farmers to crossbreed their cows with European bulls.

ABOVE RIGHT:

Nguni cattle grazing. Marli Stegmann of NCBS believes that feedlots have created a negative perception of Ngunis, resulting in financial exploitation of breeders. COURTESY OF SPIER WINE FARM

FAST FACTS

- Marli Stegmann of the NCBS says Nguni breeders are being exploited by feedlots.
- She encourages farmers and breeders to produce crossbred weaners for the feedlots.
- A R2/kg penalty was placed on Nguni weaners at Karan Beef.

co-op GWK, has partnered with a feedlot in Douglas in the Northern Cape to feed Nguni weaners in a 'hotel system'.

"The feedlot in Douglas, which is happily taking all Nguni weaners, Nguni crosses and all other breeds, is proof of this [success]," she says. "Nguni farmers send their weaners to the feedlot, pay for the feed on a monthly basis for the 90 to 120 days each weaner is in the feedlot, and share in the profit."

Stegmann adds that the NCBS encourages its

"We introduced a R2/kg deduction on Nguni weaners four years ago because they did not perform as well as other breeds. We feed a hot ration, full of energy, as we get the best results from this overall. We cannot accommodate different rations for different breeds. In our feedlot, weaners grow at 1,5kg to 1,8kg per day. The variation is between winter and summer. We slaughter at 430kg to 450kg.

"We do take Nguni crosses at the full weaner price, but they must meet with our criteria. They must be dehorned, males must be castrated and they must have good conformation – good depth, good muscle development and good hindquarters. We expect the same from all breeds and prefer male weaners as they grow faster. We have 70% males and 30% females in our feedlot.

"We stopped taking Nguni weaners from the Eastern Cape because we were being sent too many intact bulls and animals with horns. Conformation was not always as we expected.

As long as they meet our criteria, we are now accepting castrated Nguni weaner bulls again, which perform better than the heifers. We currently pay R2/kg less for Nguni weaner bulls.

"I do not know anything about a R4/kg to R5/kg penalty for Nguni weaners. If any farmer is told his weaners are going to Karan and that this penalty applies, he must contact us. We have never deducted more than R2/kg.

"To accommodate the Eastern Cape cattlemen, we will establish a holding station in Adendorp before the end of this year where we will accept all breeds, including Nguni crosses and Nguni weaner bulls.

"Cattlemen can bring any number of weaners here and they will be paid within 24 hours of the delivery.

"We will precondition the animals in Adendorp for 15 to 18 days before sending them to our Heidelberg feedlot, which currently accommodates 135 000 cattle at a time, or 400 000 annually, on 800ha. This is 35% of the total beef market in South Africa.

"At Karan we feel that suspending the revised import regulations is a good thing, because South Africa is a net importer of beef. We cannot produce enough beef in South Africa.

"We try to promote good relationships with our suppliers, and encourage all cattlemen to contact us if they have any queries."

• Contact Jannie Botha on 082 777 3705 or jannieb@karanbeef.com.

recognise that feedlots are private companies and are free to dictate their own terms, their relationship with cattle farmers is highly compromised by one-sided behaviour.

"The major feedlots wield an enormous amount of power in South Africa. It does not engender goodwill or trust when they fail to let farmers know in advance why they take certain decisions," she says. "I'm of the opinion that the feedlots have created a perception that the Nguni weaner is not good for the feedlot and for this reason they are exploiting our breeders by paying less per kilogram and making an extra R200 to R400 per animal."

Nguni weaners can be successfully rounded off in a feedlot if handled correctly, according to Stegmann. The Kalahari Nguni Club, in collaboration with the

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE →



To comment on this story, visit www.facebook.com/FarmersWeeklySA

← members to establish more of these models throughout the country.

CROSSBREEDING

"In any industry, it's unwise to rely on only one client or option to market a product," says Stegmann. "We have to focus on the Nguni's excellent characteristics and qualities. We encourage and support Nguni breeders and farmers to either establish alternative structures to market our product, or to work within the existing feedlot structures and produce crossbred weaners they say they have no problem accepting."

As an option, she suggests that Nguni cattle farmers use European bulls on their Nguni cows.

"Despite the feedlots, the Nguni cow is a beef producers' most profitable option for optimal kg/ha. With Ngunis, a cattleman can run more breeding cows per hectare because of their lower weight (average 367kg), that can produce calves of 230kg when crossed with European breed bulls.

"That is excellent cow efficiency."

Stegmann herself uses Simmentaler bulls on purebred Nguni cows, and says it has been successful; the Nguni cow can inhibit the foetus growth and give birth to a small calf, and she has had no calving problems.

"These calves are very good performers in a feedlot," she says.

Stegmann has 400 breeding Nguni cows, half of which are for stud breeding and half for crossbreeding.

'THE MAJOR FEEDLOTS ARE EXPLOITING NGUNI CATTLE FARMERS'

"The Nguni is also a perfect breed for marketing straight from the veld in ox production systems," she says. "Its beef can be marketed as free-range, free of hormones and antibiotics, with healthier fat marbling. The NCBS will make a presentation at the beef classification workshop on 9 November to stress that veld-raised AB and

ABOVE:
A Karan Beef feedlot. Currently, the feedlot pays R2/kg less for Nguni weaner bulls.

Gys Jooste, founder of Douglas Beef Feedlot

"When the price of Nguni weaners dropped by R2/kg, a fellow Nguni cattleman, Frans Lubbe, and I decided to do something different for the Nguni," says Gys, who runs his feedlot specifically for Ngunis. He established his feedlot five years ago, but started concentrating on Nguni weaners only in the last two years. He puts black Angus bulls on Nguni females.

"We developed a ration that suits the Nguni weaner," he continues. "It's less 'hot', with more protein and less energy in the mix, than the ration fed to weaners by most other feedlots. They're performing excellently on this ration, and we give our cattlemen suppliers feedback on the performance of each weaner."

"We can accommodate 8 000 weaners at a time but are expanding our

capacity to 10 000 to keep up with demand. We accept Ngunis, Nguni crosses and other breeds. They should not be lighter than 160kg and ideally between 200kg and 210kg for best cost of gain in the feedlot. Farmers or breeders pay us monthly for the feed per animal, which works out at about R18/day over 90 days to 120 days. Weaners gain an average of 1,3kg/day and we send them for slaughter at 360kg to 400kg."

GWK co-op plays its part in this initiative and is happy to make financial arrangements for its members or farmers who join, to cover the feed costs on mutually agreed terms.

"Farmers who send weaners to us receive about R4 000 per weaner, after food and transport costs."

• **Phone the Douglas Beef Feedlot on 071 657 6916.**

B cattle should obtain a higher slaughter price."

She denies that crossbreeding with Nguni females for the commercial market will destroy the breed. On 1 July, the NCBS had 43 780 registered females and 12 555 bulls, with many committed breeders to keep the purebred Nguni strong.

Others disagree, saying the Nguni feedlot crisis is already adversely affecting the number of buyers, as commercial Nguni farmers who cannot afford the feedlot discrimination buy into other breeds.

Stegmann suggests another alternative is that Nguni farmers background and feedlot their own animals. She does this on her farm when it is possible to do so at a lower price than sending the cattle to the

feedlot. "Different feedlot mixes are widely available and the feed agents can advise on this," she says.

"We've successfully done this with 50 to 100 animals at a time, without antibiotics or growth hormones. They gain 1,3kg to 1,5kg/day in our feedlot; at 380kg to 420kg we send them straight to the abattoir as A-grade. We're fortunate in that our local feedlots have not discriminated against Nguni weaners."

Stegmann says research is being finalised on Nguni weaners with Vencor, the largest feedlot north of Polokwane, to determine whether Ngunis perform less successfully in standard feedlots. "We'll release these results as soon as we have them," she says.

• **Contact Marli Stegmann on 083 441 0930 or marli@mafred.co.za. ■ FW**