

THE VIEW FROM DOWN UNDER
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In September of last year, I was fortunate to be able to attend the International Grassland Congress in Sydney, Australia. It was an incredible experience. In addition to gaining insight at about what is now very much a world-wide beef industry, I was able spend a little time getting to know Australia better.

Australia and Its Beef Industry

It is a surprise to most folks to learn that Australia is the 6th largest country in the world. In fact, Australia is nearly the size of the Continental US (2.97 mi² vs. 3.12 mi², respectively). It has a population of approximately 23.4 million people, which is only about 7.5% of the US population.

Much of the interior of the Australia is arid. Consequently, Australia's agricultural industries are primarily located along the eastern coast where rainfall and climatic conditions enable greater productivity. This is also true of Australia's beef industry (Figure 1).

The Australian beef industry is similar in many ways to the US (Table 1). The majority of the cattle are the same breeds common in the US, though a Brahman-influence (primarily used in the hotter Northern Territory and Queensland) represents a fair percentage of the herd there. Though Australia has only 3% of the world's cattle inventory, it is the world's seventh largest beef producing country. It produces about 4% of world's beef supply but provides about 22% of the beef that is traded internationally. The majority of Australia's beef goes to Japan, South Korea, and the US. A big portion of the Australian beef that is traded internationally is grassfed, and it is the US's largest supplier of grassfed beef.

A Drive in the Country

Sydney is a remarkable city. I must admit, that of all the cities I have visited, Sydney is one of my favorites. The Royal Botanical Gardens, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, and the famous Sydney Opera House are all truly memorable. But, after enjoying the four days of the International Grassland Congress and spending the evenings touring the highlights of Sydney, this country-boy needed to get out of the big city.

I decided to spend an extra couple of days in Australia on a bit of a tour (or as the Aussies would say, a "walk-about"). I knew that the state of New South Wales was in one of the most important agricultural regions, so I wanted to see what Australian agriculture really looked like. I convinced three colleagues from Auburn University to go with me and we split the cost of the travel. We drove south

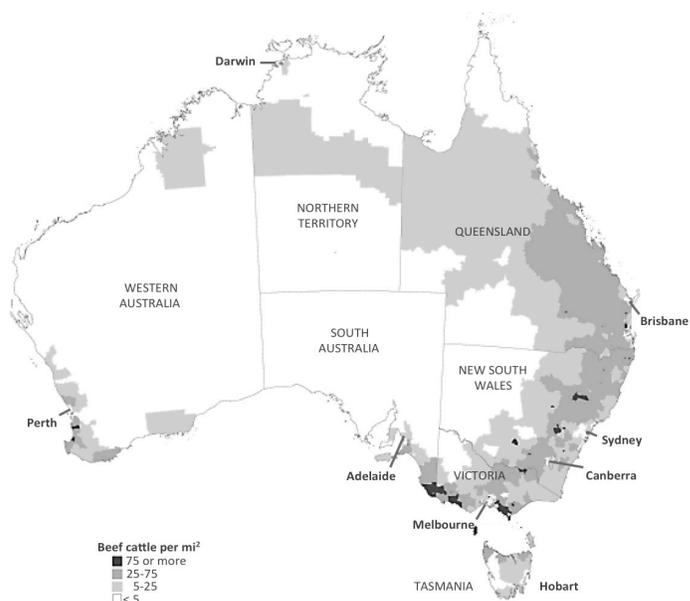


Fig. 1. Distribution of the Australian beef cattle herd.

Table 1. Comparison of the Australian and American beef cattle industries.

	Australia	USA
Cattle Producers	40,000	720,000
Size of the Herd (million head)	28.5	89.3
Beef Produced (million tons)	2.4	25.9
Beef Exported (% of produced)	67	9.4
Per Capita Beef Consumption	71.7	65.8

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics and Price, Waterhouse, Coopers of Australia.

out of Sydney in a general direction toward Melbourne. Though we knew that we didn't have time to drive all the way to Melbourne (despite what it looks like on the map, it is at least a 12-hr drive), we resolved to make it as far as we could.

The Australian countryside south of Sydney is quite similar to the southern US. Pastures and cropland stretched out across the rolling hills and broad river bottoms (Figure 2). We were there during the last few days of their winter. So, as we drove, great valleys of green wheat and the golden blooms of canola opened out in all directions, hedged on either side by pastures on the foothills of tree-covered mountains. Annual ryegrass, wheat, and other small grains on some crop fields provided pasture for many stocker calves, while many brood cows grazed perennial ryegrass and tall fescue on the steeper slopes.

The small towns in that region of New South Wales made one almost feel as if they were back home. I say "almost" only because they drive on the wrong side of the road and everything was flipped to what we normally see. The coffee shops, diners, and farm supply stores were full of nice and hospitable folks. To avoid spoiling this opinion, we skirted around the nation's capital of Canberra.

After about an 8-hr drive that included more than the occasional stop to take a closer look at their pastures and the spectacular scenery, we arrived in the small resort town of Cooma. This region is to the east and down the slope from Mount Kosciuszko, Australia's highest point and the origin of the Snowy River (made famous in the western movie, "The Man from Snowy River").

Beginning our return trip the next morning, we drove east out of Cooma. We had never seen such a stark transition in the landscape. Within just 10 miles, we left the trees and scenic "bush" of Cooma and entered a vast treeless prairie reminiscent of the Nebraska Sandhills. Herds of Merino sheep and Hereford and Angus cattle dotted the countryside. Only occasionally did we spot the haggard but practical homes of the ranchers in this area. But, nearly as suddenly as it appeared, the prairie gave way to an abrupt tree line as we approached the Deua National Park, which seemed very similar to the southern reaches of the Appalachian Mountains. All of this stark change in landscape occurred within 70 miles of Cooma.

Once we crossed this mountain chain, we skirted along the eastern coastline, traveling north back toward Sydney. Rolling pastures reminiscent of North Georgia and occasional stretches of freshwater swamps and tidewater marshes similar to parts of the Georgia/Florida flatwoods separated the seaside towns. Closer to the coast and nearer to Sydney, pastures were primarily kikuyugrass, a hardy perennial similar to bermudagrass but in the same family as pearl millet.

An exclamation point was put on the trip when, in the last few hours of daylight, we stopped to admire the view of the Tasman Sea just outside south of Sydney. We stood at the edge of the Australian continent on pastures that abruptly ended at a cliff that dropped 30 feet to the sea. As we stood there listening to the waves



Fig. 2. Scenes from New South Wales, Australia. Canola and wheat (top left) were common winter crops, though much of the surrounding landscape was used for beef cattle. Cattle are bought at market price at buying points like this one (top right) just outside of Cooma, which is one of the larger ones in the region. Rolling pastures (bottom left) at the edge of the mountains look similar to spring scenes in North Georgia, while pastures nearer the coast and closer to Sydney were predominantly kikuyugrass (bottom right).

crash against the rocks, watching sheep graze, and keeping an eye on an approaching rain shower, a brilliant double rainbow appeared. We knew we had had a blessed trip. I hope that someday you might also have a chance to go to that special somewhere over the rainbow, to that land called Oz.

For a look at some of the pictures from my trip down under or to find information on our own forage systems, visit our website, www.georgiaforages.com. If you have additional forage management questions, visit or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.