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Cattle must have sound teeth

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WHY CHECK TEETH?

Most farmers check their sheep flocks for sound mouths, but few run the same check on cattle. Yet it is just as important for cattle to have good teeth as it is for sheep.

Broken-mouthed and 'gummy' sheep are a poor financial risk: broken-mouthed ewes produce less wool, rear fewer lambs, and may die before they can be sold in reasonable condition. Similarly with cattle: broken-mouthed cows lose condition, rear their calves poorly, fail to get in calf and, if they don't die first, bring lower prices when sold. If you continue to run cattle without knowing whether they have sound mouths, you could be wasting money and resources.

What happens to teeth in cattle varies between breeds, individual animals, properties and seasons. The age of a cow is not always important provided she is physically sound and productive. And, if you are prepared to give her your best feed, you could extend the life of an older cow. But you must know which cows are worth the trouble: measure their age by checking the number of sound teeth, not by counting the years!

Finally, you should check the teeth of your cattle ('mouth' them) so you know the age structure of your breeding herd, as this will have an important bearing on breeding and management decisions, for example:

- Do I want to increase or decrease breeding numbers?
- How many heifer replacements do I need?
- Do I need to change my heifer management?
- What should I do about my cash flow, livestock numbers and taxation?

Try to estimate when older cows will stop being top producers. If you know the state of their teeth, you will know which cows to sell and which ones need special attention.

HOW AND WHEN TO MOUTH

The photographs overleaf will give you a fairly accurate guide to mousing cattle. The best times to do this are when mousing can be fitted in with another job, such as drenching or drafting. Cattle should also be mouthed at the following times:

- *Whenever you buy a mob of mixed-age cows.* Check cows for physical soundness, including the state of their teeth.
- *Before joining.* Check your breeders to avoid wasting valuable bull power and feed.
- *When you have to feed during bad seasons.* Make sure you are feeding sound animals—it is wasteful and expensive to feed old, broken-mouthed cows if they are unable to respond.

It helps if cows are identified individually, if you keep good records, and if you run older cows in a separate mob to avoid extra yarding and drafting.

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DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of review (September 2002.) However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Agriculture or the user's independent adviser.

The eruption of permanent incisor teeth defines the age categories. In captions to the photographs below, the age ranges are given as an indication of the approximate age of cattle in each category.



Milk tooth—about 0 to 24 months.



2-tooth: about 18 to 30 months.



4-tooth: about 24 to 36 months.



6-tooth: about 30 to 42 months.



8-tooth: about 36 months onwards.



Worn full mouth: from about 7 years.



Broken mouth: from about 8 years.



Gummy mouth: from about 9 years.