

Cutting cattle stress delivers payoff in beef quality, farmer says

A Hawke's Bay farmer says reducing stress levels among cattle is resulting in higher quality Wagyu beef.



File pic Photo: 123RF

Matangi Farm's beef cattle is raised just behind Havelock North's Te Mata Peak.

Farm manager Jamie Gaddum said they try to reduce stressors on the cattle as much as possible.

"We've tried to keep trucking to a minimum. We've got two farms, but they're only on a truck once in the lifetime," he said.

"In terms of going from lots of feed to less feed or really steep hill country to flatter stuff, we're trying to keep them on consistent environments that they can get used to.

"We make sure that within our farming policy and farming management that the cattle have got, I call it a 'bell wave' of feed ahead of them, so that they can

always be putting weight on and their bodies don't go through a stress period of losing weight.

"We find that when the feed starts to be restricted and they start losing weight, the marbling that's within the meat is the first to go.

"So that's really important that we keep putting weight on them."

The marbling score in beef is measured by the degree of visible intramuscular fat found within the meat - which Gaddum said was directly related to the conditions experienced by stock, including stress.

Gaddum said loud dogs were not used on the farm and they aimed to keep yard time to a minimum to further reduce stress.

He said that meant the cows were more relaxed and it made the quality of their Wagyu beef top-notch.

"Stress produces lactic acid in the meat from the breakdown of glycogen, resulting in beef with a lower pH level, lighter colour, reduced water-binding capacity and it's tougher to eat," he said.

"We've achieved pH levels consistently between 5.7 and 5.9 - which is considered optimum for the highest quality meats.

"We also feel good knowing we are providing our herd with the best conditions on farm and the most stress-free life possible."

Gaddum said the approach prioritised the cattle's welfare and was well-received by customers, because consumers were becoming more aware of the conditions their food was sourced from.