

SE TheNation
HD **Buoyant sale puts meat on the industry's bones**

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WC 522 words

PD 23 August 2014

SN The Australian

SC AUSTLN

ED Australian

PG 8

LA English

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Way out west, the good times have only just begun

FITZROY Crossing's rodeo ground, in the heart of Western Australia's Kimberley, doesn't immediately feel like the sort of place to gauge the health of economic activity in Asia.

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But if yesterday's annual bull sale in the dusty town, 400km east of Broome, is a reliable barometer, the hungry nations to our north will be eating plenty more Australian beef in coming years as their middle classes grow more affluent and demand higher-quality food.

The average sale price at the Kimberley's biggest livestock sale was \$3800 per head, up 23 per cent on last year's price of \$3100 per head, signalling a return to confidence in the industry.

Almost 150 bulls — red brahmans, grey brahmans, droughtmasters, Queenslanders and charbrays — went under the auctioneer's hammer.

The top price was \$6500 for a droughtmaster bull, bought by Jubilee Downs pastoralist Keith Anderson.

The sale came after official data this week showed Australia's live-cattle trade has now officially recovered from the federal Labor government's controversial 2011 export ban to Indonesia, up 78 per cent to \$1.05 billion for 2013-14.

The cattle industry hailed the data as proof of a long-awaited turnaround that was being driven by unprecedented Asian demand.

West Australian Agriculture Minister Ken Bastion told the 150 buyers at the bull sale that the potential of the state's cattle industry was limitless, but he did not like to use the word "boom" to describe the surge in activity.

"It's not boom time," he said. "We've only just begun." "A boom time is when you are just about to fall off the cliff." Queensland pastoralist Johnny Edwards and his father, Jim, trucked 25 of their best red brahman bulls to Fitzroy Crossing for the sale because of the lower levels of confidence in their drought-ravaged state.

"We had the Indonesia export ban and then we had BJD (bovine Johne's disease) last year, plus we've had drought," he said.

"But confidence is picking up, especially over here." Australia's richest person, Gina Rinehart, boosted confidence in the industry this year when she paid about \$40 million to snare a 50 per cent stake in two Kimberley cattle stations.

Mrs Rinehart's mining rival, Fortescue Metals Group chairman Andrew Forrest, bought Western Australia's biggest beef producer, Harvey Beef, for more than \$30m in May.

The deals confirm that Mrs Rinehart and Mr Forrest view the potential growth in demand for Australian beef in the same way they grew rich from China's soaring demand for the Pilbara's iron ore over the past decade Mr Baston also announced \$15m initiatives for Kimberley and Pilbara cattle producers to enable them to expand into key markets with the aim of reducing their heavy reliance on live exports to Indonesia. Mr Baston said the government would set up a northern beef development hub in Broome. The reporter travelled to Fitzroy Crossing courtesy of the West Australian government

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AN Document AUSTLN0020140822ea8n000bc