

Drought Management Checklist for the Livestock Business

Drought can have a devastating impact on the livestock business. Making decisions in a drought is difficult and getting some perspective on the issue is important before you can implement effective decisions.

Having a plan when the livestock business may be on the verge of facing a drought is critical. The plan and decisions individual farm business make will vary depending on individual circumstances.

The Plan (be prepared)

- The plan needs to include objectives, dates and numbers where possible and ensure all people involved in the business are part of the decision making process.
- The plan should include what you will do in the drought and how you will recover.
- Establish a support network, seek advice and gather information.
- Consider the time needed to be invested into a strategy e.g. intensive confinement feeding of livestock.
- Cost out decisions e.g. feeding, selling, agisting
- A drought plan should take into account livestock welfare, viability of the farm business and on farm resources that allow for a farm business to recover as quickly as possible.
- Know the potential 'what if' scenarios and how your farming business would manage these if the situation should arise e.g. a late break the following autumn

Short Term Strategies

- In situations where prolonged feeding is required such as a dry winter and spring followed by a late break, it is often more economical to sell livestock than to purchase in feed. Focus on maintaining critical breeder numbers and know what it will cost to feed them to meet their requirements.
- Do not underfeed breeding animals as they ability to be productive the following year is compromised. It is better to feed less animals and meet their requirements properly.
- Do not feed unproductive animals who will not make you a return.
- Identify your most valuable paddocks (recently renovated, most productive) and ensure these paddocks are not over grazed and maintain minimum groundcover.
- Identify your poor performing paddocks (unimproved) and use these as sacrifice paddocks where possible.
- Monitor livestock body condition and pastures regularly to ensure neither deteriorate to critical levels.
- Ensure you have enough feed on hand for the length of the drought period and following into autumn and winter.
- Livestock under nutritional stress are more likely to succumb to health issues such as worms.
- Animals should be vaccinated against clostridial diseases which are more likely to occur when an animal is under stress and they are grazing close to the ground ingesting more soil.
- Animals that have had no access to green feed for extended dry periods can succumb to vitamin A and E deficiencies so injecting livestock with these vitamins can be beneficial.
- If supplementing with high amounts of cereal grain it is important to address calcium and sodium needs as cereal grain is deficient in these.
- Evaluate weaning times and wean calves no later than 6 months and lambs no later than 12 weeks of age and earlier if needed. Significant feed savings can be made following weaning and it allows the breeding female to recover.

Long Term Strategies

- What opportunities may have arisen as a result of the drought e.g. changing breeds, changing the ratios of beef, sheep and or cropping?
- What are the limitations in the soil preventing plant roots from accessing moisture e.g. pH, excess of a trace element.
- Reassess pasture species. For the long term consider more drought tolerant varieties.

Recovering from a drought

Pastures

Assess pastures following a drought to determine if a paddock will recover which is largely dependent on species, time of the break, rainfall received following a break and grazing management. If finances allow use the opportunity to renovate paddocks particularly if livestock numbers have been reduced. Allow pastures to recover following a drought (minimum of 1500kg/DM) and continue to hand feed until pasture targets are met. Control any insects, pests or weeds that may inhibit the ability of the pasture to recover.

Grow as much feed as possible through fertiliser, nitrogen and quick feed options such as cereals. Soil testing is valuable to see what fertiliser savings can be made particularly if there was a failed crop planted the previous year.

Restocking

Review the livestock enterprise and make changes in the enterprise mix or breeding objectives to meet market requirements if necessary.

Look at the return in purchasing breeders, versus breeding back versus trading and ensure in the scenario where money needs to be borrowed that the return made will cover interest and principal.

Weeds

Assess paddocks where feed purchased from off farm has been fed to livestock and control weeds before they set seed and spread.

Livestock Health

The break of the drought means a dramatic change in diet for livestock and releasing hungry stock back out onto green paddocks following containment or sacrifice paddock feeding can incur significant losses. Limiting pasture or transitioning onto green feed with the use of hay is important. Bloat needs to be managed on high legume pastures and all livestock should be vaccinated against pulpy kidney/enterotoxaemia which often arises when there is a rapid change in the diet.

Address the nutritional needs of autumn calving cows and ewes on short green feed.



For more information about managing livestock in a drought:

Feeding and Managing Sheep in Dry Times

Department of Agriculture, and Australian Wool Innovation (Bulletin 4697 November 2006)

<https://www.wool.com/globalassets/start/on-farm-research-and-development/sheep-health-welfare-and-productivity/sheep-nutrition/awi-drought-resources/bulletinfeedingsheep2006.pdf>

Drought Feeding and Management of Beef Cattle, a guide for farmers and land managers

Victorian Department of Primary Industries & MLA 2007 (ISBN 978 -1-741 99-0355-5 online)

http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/266093/20070320-Drought-Feeding-of-Beef-cattle-for-the-web-FINAL.pdf

Content and images courtesy of Primary Industries and Regions SA. This flyer is produced as part of the Government of South Australia's Upper South East Drought Package.