

Managing livestock in dry times

Poor early season rainfall can cause concern for many land managers when trying to manage and feed livestock through dry times. For those affected, it's important to remember that dry times are a part of the Australian climate cycle. Taking proactive steps to adapt management strategies is essential in mitigating the impact dry conditions have on farm profitability, the condition of natural resources and the resilience of landholders, their families and employees.

Why develop a livestock management plan?

Studies have shown that developing an action plan is the defining factor in surviving dry times, and the better the plan, the better the outcomes.

Developing an action plan provides landholders with a sense of control over the situation. Undertaking the various actions identified by planning builds ownership for those involved, helping to maintain optimism in an otherwise difficult period and avoiding negative mental health outcomes.



Take action: Managing livestock during dry times

- Make a plan and undertake the required actions
- Undertake budgets for feeding and selling scenarios
- Take stock of hay supplies and calculate
- Prepare cash flow budgets for the next two-three years
- Review decisions regularly
- Act quickly and decisively
- Look for other opportunities
- Remain positive
- Plan a holiday
- Be prepared to confine livestock to preserve natural resources such as soil and native vegetation.

Implementing a successful livestock management plan also reduces the potential negative implications upon farm profitability, animal welfare and natural resources. Developing resilience for dry times also helps landholders to bounce back quicker once rains arrive.

Landholders should start preparing a plan as soon as possible, remembering that stock prices will worsen and access to water, food and agistment and off-farm income will be harder to find the longer the dry times continue.

Developing a livestock management plan

1. **Stocktake available water and feed:** Survey your farm to see how much feed (pasture, grain, hay) and water you have on hand to determine how long you can sustain current livestock numbers. Pregnant or lactating ewes/cows will have higher energy and protein requirements so this needs to be factored in.
2. **Review your financial position:** It's wise to review your financial position with your bank manager in order to determine what strategies will suit your circumstances. Selling some or all of your livestock may be a necessary option to maximise cash flow and minimise the potential risk to your business. In some cases it is necessary to sell some stock to feed the rest.
3. **Identify management strategies:** Once you've developed an accurate picture of your current circumstances, list the relevant strategies that you can use to manage livestock during dry times. Some of the alternatives are listed in this factsheet, but you may also want to consult your stock agent or livestock consultant for more specific advice.
4. **Implement, review and adapt:** Break up the management strategies into action lists with a timeline and undertake these specific actions. Inform family and staff members so they're aware of what you're doing and why-this helps to alleviate the fear of the unknown. Revisit your plan regularly, review your management strategies and adapt them as necessary.

Considering the options

Selling livestock

Selling some or all of your stock can ease the pressures associated with feeding and managing stock as well as boosting cash flow. Selling livestock is best done early in the dry period, before market prices begin to fall, and while livestock are still in a good weight range.

Considerations include:

- stock quality and value (including wool clip for sheep)
- ability to support stock until rain arrives
- likely length of dry period
- demand for stock at the end of the dry period
- taxation implications
- ability to improve stock quality during dry period.

Where possible, selling only part of the flock/herd and keeping only the most productive animals (breeding stock) helps to rebuild stock numbers after the dry times end.

Supplementary feeding

Supplying feed in addition to pastures or stubbles may be a consideration for livestock owners. In determining if supplementary feeding is a viable option, land managers must take the following factors into consideration:

- Animal Health is the foremost consideration in determining whether supplementary feeding is an option. Where livestock cannot be adequately fed (e.g. due to financial constraints) to maintain a condition score of 2 or more, they should be sold or agisted elsewhere.
- Feed budgeting is required to determine whether the feed supplied will meet the nutritional demands of the animals. This will also provide an indication of the volume of supplementary feed required (and therefore the cost) and what actions are required by the landholder in order to maximise the outcomes. There are several good online feed budgeting tools available, including this [feed budget calculator](#) from Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA).
- Production objectives need to be considered in order to understand how livestock will need to be fed. For example, if the objective is maximising weight gain, a high calorie diet will be required—most likely from grain. However, if breeding animals is the aim, the nutritional requirements may be more complex in order to meet the needs of pregnant or lactating mothers, and their offspring.

Once these factors have been explored, a cost versus benefit analysis can be undertaken in order to determine if supplementary feeding is a viable option.

In determining the costs involved, land managers should include:

- the availability, quality and proximity of supplementary feed (now and into the future)
- the cost of additional labour (required to feed out).

Confinement feeding

Fencing off a small section of a property as a stock containment area (SCA) is a useful way of intensively holding, feeding and monitoring stock during dry times. Once established, many landholders find SCAs to be useful in other situations, such as during fire or flood, to quarantine animals, or when paddock feed is limited in the short term.

Confining stock to a limited area allows landholders to protect natural resources by reducing access to pasture, preventing soil erosion and controlling the spread of weeds. In addition, it reduces labour costs and can be used to improve the productivity of livestock.

For those considering a confinement area as part of a stock management plan, [Natural Resources Adelaide and Mt Lofty Ranges factsheet](#) has excellent information about building and operating an SCA. There are also guidelines on feeding and managing restricted livestock, and a [series of videos](#) by Birchip Cropping Group focusing on containment feeding sheep.

Facing the dry

Dry conditions and the impact they have on farm operations can place significant pressure on land managers, their families and communities. Developing and implementing a plan to manage your way through dry times is a known factor for success and also helps to maintain optimism and provide a sense of control over the situation. The earlier you start, the more effective your plan will be.

It is important to effectively communicate your plan and proposed outcomes with your family and any employees. Keeping them informed helps to manage their anxiety and develops a supportive team environment. By knowing what the plan is, your family and employees can help to undertake the actions required to manage livestock in a proactive and enthusiastic manner.



Decision support tools

There are a wide range of tools and resources available to assist land managers in the decisions required to navigate dry times. These include weather forecasting services, pasture management tools, feed-on-offer and feed requirement calculators.

[Feed demand calculator](#)

[Rainfall to pasture growth outlook tool](#)

[Feed-on-offer \(FOO\) Library](#)

[Bureau of Meteorology – Water and the land](#)

[Natural Resources SAMDB weather station network](#)

[Natural Resources SAMDB soil moisture probe network](#)

[Natural Resources SAMDB nrmFARM tool](#)

Resources for landholders

The following is a summary of just some of the useful resources available for landholders managing stock in dry conditions. There is a significant library of resources available on the internet and land managers are encouraged to search the web to find reliable information relevant to their circumstances.

Drought preparation and management

[Planning for drought](#)

[Dry times management](#)

[Dry times factsheet](#)

[Drought feeding](#)

[Rainfall outlook](#)

Sheep

[Feeding sheep during a drought](#)

[Water security](#)

[Drought feeding and management of sheep](#)

[Supplementary feeding sheep](#)

[Drought feeding to minimise ewe and lamb losses – a producer case study](#)

[Which sheep do I keep?](#)

Cattle

[Dry times beef management](#)

[Drought management of beef](#)

[Future beef – managing cattle in dry conditions](#)



For more information

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