

Livestock management options

Feed, sell, agist

There is no standard strategy when it comes to managing livestock in dry times as no farm is the same and each property and business are impacted differently.

Farm enterprises, goals and financial positions change for a variety of reasons and therefore the course of action livestock producers will take changes and will often be a combination of strategies.

Past experience may influence the path of action a farm business may consider, particularly in light of recent repetitive years of drought and dry conditions. Letting livestock starve or die of thirst is not an option and most producers do not see this as a financially viable or ethical course of action.

Management options for livestock come under three general strategies feed, sell or agist.

Feed

- Use feed tests to determine the best value for money and cost feeds based on energy and protein.
- Feed budget to ensure you can, and are meeting animal requirements and it is an economically feasible option to feed.
- Segregate animals into various classes according to their nutritional requirements to be cost effective and avoid shy feeders.
- A confinement feeding or sacrifice paddock set up is important to reduce the potential for degradation and damage to paddocks.
- Ensure supplementary feeding is undertaken before livestock lose too much weight as it is costly to put weight back on an animal and cheaper to maintain it.
- Allocate a cost to home grown fodder.
- Understanding the basic principles of ruminant nutrition is important.

PROS:

- Can still earn some income.
- Do not incur restocking costs.
- Maintain genetic base and breeding cycle.
- Can feed animals for production to turn them off quickly rather than holding as stores until the season breaks.

CONS:

- Costly to feed particularly for long periods of time.
- Can be difficult to predict the length of time hand feeding will be required.
- Time consuming and mentally taxing.
- Potential to introduce weed seeds if fodder is purchased; take measures to prevent the spread and infestation of weeds.
- Must feed stock to requirements, particularly young animals or the breeding potential can be impacted on in the following year, and in the case of young animals for life.
- Potential health issues with being in containment, and transition out of containment, e.g. pulpney kidney and vaccinations.

Sell

Prioritise what is sold with least productive animals sold first.

PROS:

- No cash outlay and provides cash.
- Free up conserved fodder and paddock feed for remaining livestock.
- Young animals can be the most expensive to feed in dry times but often have the best genetics.
- Reduce pressure on soils and pastures.
- Depending on the number sold you may free up extra time to be directed elsewhere in your farm business or obtain off farm income.

CONS:

- Disease and weed issues from replacement stock
- Costly to restock and if a widespread drought difficult to source
- Loss of genetics
- Breeding cycle may be disrupted as a result of replacement breeders being purchased
- Herd or flock rebuilding can be a slow process and long term effects may be felt from reduced income in following years
- Tax liability
- May be forced to sell in a depressed market if dry conditions are widespread and the market is flooded
- Need to make the decision early before animals lose condition and market is flooded.



Agistment

- Make a decision early if agistment is to be sourced as often in dry times, it can be difficult to find and agistment costs may rise.
- A written agreement is advisable to help ensure disagreements are avoided and both parties understand what is expected of each other.
- Agistment has become less available in recent years and may not be an option.
- Check your stock regularly to minimise theft and deaths. Permanent identification that cannot be removed is an advantage and a deterrent.
- Ensure water quality and quantity are adequate.
- Agistment may include contract feeding in a commercial feedlot for finishing.
- Understand the interstate regulations of your herd or flock disease status, if moving livestock across state borders, and how that may impact bringing livestock back.

PROS:

- Transport and agistment can be costly but in some cases cheaper than hand feeding.
- Retain genetics and maintain breeding stock.
- Protect soils and pasture and allows pastures to recover and respond following opening rains.
- Less taxing mentally than feeding.
- Avoid or reduce the need to source and purchase feed.
- Potentially can provide better quality feed.
- Agisting livestock may provide additional paddock feed for remaining animals.

CONS:

- Weed and disease biosecurity risk; sourcing agistment close to a market so animals do not have to be brought home may be an option if there is an issue or risk.
- Stock theft.
- Digestive upsets/nutritional disorders from rapid change in diet.
- Toxicity issues with weeds.
- Difficulties in transporting late pregnant and lactating females; livestock must be in adequate body condition to travel.
- Transport and management costs are incurred
- Inadequate handling facilities and fencing may be an issue.

We recommend to assess the livestock management options each time you need to move livestock off of paddocks. Review each option thoughtfully to make the best decision for you, for farm and the individual circumstance that you are in.



More information

Series of fact sheets for farmers to manage livestock and farm finances in dry times. For example, Feed budgeting in dry times and Calculating supplementary feed amounts.

Landscape South Australia – Northern and Yorke | Dry times

<https://www.landscape.sa.gov.au/ny/land-and-coast/land-management/dry-times>

Drought feeding and management of sheep

A guide for farmers and land managers 2018

<https://www.feedinglivestock.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Sheep-drought-feeding-guide.pdf>



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