

Grazing management following drought

Extensive Industries Development

Introduction

Livestock need particular attention following drought-breaking rain. The period brings its own specific problems, not the least of which are those brought about by the change in diet arising from the new pasture growth.

Stress due to wet conditions, and what can be a period of low nutrient intake, needs to be managed carefully if the transition to normal pasture conditions is to be successful.

Rain – the immediate effect

Prolonged wet conditions will often cause stock to limit their intake, that is, 'to go off their feed'. Where stock are being fed on the ground, much of this feed can be lost in wet conditions through trampling (especially if the feed is grain). When feeding directly onto the ground, select well-drained areas and increase the feeding rates, ideally with hay which is less prone to loss through trampling.

If rain is coupled with windy conditions, stock will need sheltered areas, particularly if the stock are in poor condition. Low temperatures will compound the problem – the nutritional stress experienced by stock in cold, wet, windy conditions is likely to increase substantially. An increase in feeding rates, preferably with hay, is likely to be required in order to prevent stock losses. Keep in mind that sudden dietary changes can severely disrupt the rumen – one effect can be tender wool in sheep.

The green pick

The early pasture growth following rain, called the 'green pick', is high in water content and low in dry matter content. It is the dry matter which contains the nutrients required by livestock. Dry sheep need about 400 kg of pasture dry matter per hectare (400 kg DM/ha) to maintain their weight. This is equivalent to a pasture height of 1.5–2 cm. For dry cattle, the availability for maintenance is about 900 kg DM/ha (3–4 cm pasture height).

See assessing pasture in drought

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/assesspasture for further information.

A particular problem with this 'green pick' phase is that animals will stop eating the supplied feed in preference to the green pick. Generally the green pick is **not** sufficient to sustain stock early after rain, and stock can actually die from starvation. It is important to keep livestock restricted in paddocks where they will continue to eat supplied feed until sufficient paddock feed is available. It is important **not** to stop hand feeding too early following the availability of paddock feed, and for grain and/or hay feeding to be reduced slowly over 2–3 weeks (Primefact 362 *Animal health following drought*).

Where stock have been confined for feeding, access to pasture will need to be restricted. While still keeping stock confined mainly to the feeding area, provide a limited amount of grazing on pasture. This will not only benefit the stock but aid in the rehabilitation of the valuable pasture resource. The time spent each day should increase slowly until full grazing is provided after about 1 week.

Animal health

When making grazing management decisions after drought, you need to consider the types of pastures being grazed and any implications for stock health.

Due to a lack of competition, pastures can often be dominated by plants that can affect livestock health. Some pasture species are toxic in their early growth phase. For example:

- rapidly growing phalaris can lead to phalaris staggers and phalaris sudden death poisoning;
- rapid growth of improved grasses, cereals and broadleaf weeds such as variegated thistle can lead to nitrate/nitrite poisoning;
- legume-dominant pastures provide a bloat risk;
- sorghum grazed too early can cause prussic acid poisoning.

It is important that stock never be allowed to go onto these types of pastures when they are



hungry. Maintain a careful watch, and at any sign of abnormal behaviour, remove stock from the paddock. Unfortunately, with nitrate/nitrite poisoning you may not see abnormal behaviour before deaths occur.

The rapid movement of digestible young pasture growth through the gut can be the trigger for the onset of pulpy kidney (enterotoxaemia). Ensure vaccination programs are maintained. Boosters may be needed every 3 months for cattle.

Follow a sound management program to ensure effective worm control. See Internal parasites at www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/sheep-internal.

For further information, see Primefact 362 *Animal health following drought*.

Pasture management

Grazing management decisions after drought cannot be divorced from the management requirements of pastures. The sooner your farm returns to a highly productive pasture base, the more viable it will be into the future.

The lower stocking rates after destocking through the drought will help pasture rehabilitation. Keep this in mind if you are considering a rapid restocking program.

A **grazing plan** based on pasture type, pasture condition and stock requirements should be developed as part of your property management plan.

Livestock components of the plan may include the following:

- assessing the condition of all stock classes;
- setting short-term and medium-term objectives for these classes, with particular emphasis on the fertility of breeders and finishing stock within critical time periods;
- interlinking these livestock objectives with the need to rehabilitate pastures;
- considering accepting stock on agistment to control excessive pasture growth, or seeking agistment if drought recovery is slow;
- if pasture growth rates are high, concentrating stock on a smaller number of paddocks to ensure pastures remain vegetative (i.e. leafy, and not rank and running to head) for as long as possible. A vegetative pasture with a minimum of 1500 kg DM/ha for sheep and 2500 kg DM/ha for cattle should maximise growth rates and production (see Primefact 323 *Pasture assessment and livestock production*);
- considering conserving pastures that are likely to become rank, and replenishing depleted hay or silage reserves. These pastures could be used as a low quality feed source through winter. The

hay/silage option may also be an important strategy for weed control.

Further information

- Drought recovery
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/drought
- Assessing pasture in drought
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/assesspasture

Further assistance

Further assistance is available from NSW Department of Primary Industries Livestock Officers, Sheep and Wool Agronomists, and District Veterinarians.

Acknowledgment

This Primefact is based on information contained in an earlier NSW Agriculture (now NSW DPI) publication, the *Drought Recovery Guide*.

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