

Planning for future droughts

Extensive Industries Development

Introduction

Good planning provides opportunities to be productive, not only in the normal times, but also during adverse seasons. Future drought preparedness relies on long-term planning or strategic planning as part of your overall property management plan. All farmers should develop a property management plan which details the physical, financial, human and other resources available to the farm, and strategies to achieve short-term and long-term goals, including managing for drought.

Property management planning

Drought is a recognised part of the Australian climatic regime. Farm planning should recognise that drought can occur at any time and can cause land degradation, financial hardship, family stress and threats to productivity, especially if it is prolonged and followed by heavy rain and floods.

The thought of drought may be unpleasant, but property management planning which recognises the inherent limitations of the Australian environment can maintain productivity and profitability while reducing the impact of drought.

Property management planning includes:

- an assessment of the farm's physical resources;
- goal setting;
- an assessment of the human resources available to run the farm business;
- financial management to enable the accumulation of reserves or the implementation of strategies for alternative income generation;
- conservative farming practices (stocking rates, tillage, weed and pest management) to allow flexibility in the face of changing climatic conditions;
- maintenance of the farm infrastructure;

- maintenance of the farm's natural resources including soils, water, pastures, shelter belts and remnant native vegetation;
- monitoring and reassessment of the farm's capability and the management plan;
- determining your future in farming;
- recognition of animal welfare issues and community expectations.

Strategic drought preparedness

The monitoring and reassessment phase of a plan greatly helps in drought preparedness because the signs of the onset of drought are subtle, incremental and often unrecognised until remedial action is needed.

The following regular ongoing activities and strategies will greatly assist in the development of drought preparedness strategies and will reduce the risks associated with drought:

- monitoring water supplies for both quality and quantity;
- financial record keeping and analysis;
- understanding the weather forecasts and trends;
- monitoring the feed, or the market value of standing crops;
- storing feed reserves;
- using grazing pressure that accounts for future pasture growth and value;
- assessment of total grazing pressure, i.e. domestic livestock + ferals + wildlife;
- identification of the most valuable breeding stock and phased removal of the lowest priority stock;
- using management techniques that enhance the integrity of paddock trees, shelter belts and native vegetation;
- planning changes to farm enterprise mixes which take advantage of worsening seasonal conditions (such as changing from grain crops to fodder production, or changing from breeders to wethers in sheep flocks);



- assessing the introduction of different on-farm enterprises, such as tourism or farm forestry;
- developing off-farm sources of cash flow and assets for financial security.

The involvement of the whole family and farm staff in the information gathering and analysis, and in making the hard decisions, will make the identification of trigger points for action more reliable.

Tactical drought preparedness

Each individual farming unit will respond in a unique way to changing seasonal conditions depending on the property's land capability, financial resources, goals, the perception of risk, and the level of development of a property management plan. A plan which incorporates the following types of options in response to the onset of drought will provide better tactics for drought preparedness.

- Progressive and/or selective destocking. This may include reducing total stock numbers or selectively culling certain categories of stock.
- Contingency plans either to reduce livestock numbers and hence grazing pressure, or to feed livestock (sell? agist? feed?).
- Progressive and/or selective reduction of grazing pressure on pastures. This should be based on land capability, paddock condition, the need to maintain ground cover to prevent erosion, retention of identified reserve feed paddocks, and the potential for pasture regeneration.
- Strategic stock feeding for production or maintenance.
- Retention of standing crop stubbles for soil protection and livestock shelter.
- Strategies to ensure the rapid return to normal production activities.

Further information

For further information, see the NSW DPI Drought pages at:

www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/drought

Further assistance

NSW Department of Primary Industries provides information for managing the farm during a drought (website listed above), and can assist with property management planning through District Extension Officers across the State.

The Australian RAINMAN computer-based decision support package (for sale through the NSW Department of Primary Industries Bookshop, or see: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/reader/nr-climate/rainman-streamflow-cd) allows farmers to understand the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI) and use it to advantage in assessing rainfall probabilities, hence tailoring their farm activities and expectations to prevailing seasonal conditions. (See Primefact 358 *El Niño and the Southern Oscillation Index.*)

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Check for updates of this Primefact at:
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/primefacts

Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (February 2007). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.

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