

Visually assessing pasture condition and availability in drought

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Introduction

When determining what and how to feed your animals during a drought, it is important to adequately assess the condition of the pasture. A more informed decision can then be made in terms of supplementing or resting that pasture.

Assessing pasture condition during drought must take into consideration the conditions and environment in which the pasture is grown. Normally we associate dry, dead pasture with drought, and quite often the limiting factor is not the actual **quantity** of feed available but the fact that the feed is of **poor digestibility**. However, green pasture can still be in drought condition if it is too short for the animals to eat it. The extent to which either or both of these conditions apply will direct the livestock producer to the appropriate action and feeding regime.

Levels of pasture availability

The photographs in this Primefact are meant as examples and prompts only. Obviously, pastures will look different in various parts of the State. The pastures depicted here specifically illustrate temperate grassland conditions and not western rangelands, where very sparse vegetative growth is the norm, and 'browsing' can provide substantial parts of the animals' diet.

In the more temperate improved pasture environs (e.g. the Southern Tablelands of NSW), pastures may appear far more dense, with greater ground cover and less height. Refer to Primefact 323 *Pasture assessment and livestock production*.

The important point is that in these grassland environs, pasture ground cover should be protected and not be allowed to fall below critical

levels. Refer to Primefact 325 *Pasture sustainability and management in drought*

Further information

- Primefact 323 *Pasture assessment and livestock production* (includes information on pasture quantity and quality)
- Primefact 325 *Pasture sustainability and management in drought*

It is recommended that producers attend a PROGRAZE course to learn how to assess pastures and relate pasture production to animal performance. For more information on PROGRAZE, contact your local NSW Department of Primary Industries office, or visit: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/profarm/courses/pastures-and-rangelands/prograze

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (November 2006). 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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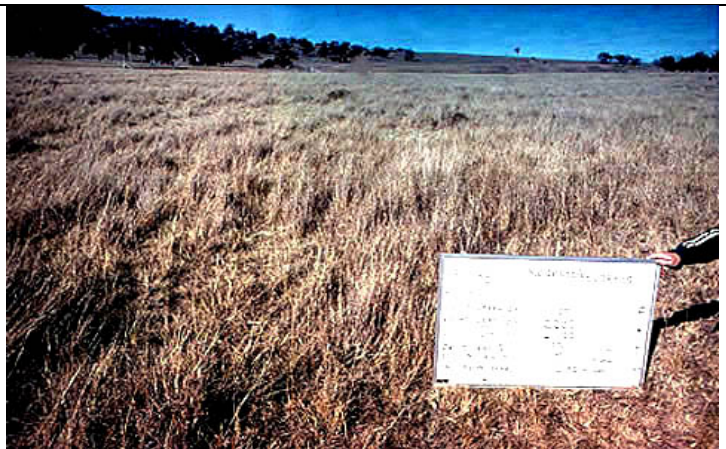
High pasture availability

If your pasture looks like that shown in Figure 1, then there is sufficient quantity of dry feed for animals to reach their potential intake; however, the quality of the feed in this particular pasture is poor. Under these pasture conditions, animals run the risk of losing weight too quickly because of their inability to digest the feed. Feed like this can also cause impaction in the rumen or stomach, leading to very poor performance and sometimes death. Reasonable production on this type of pasture will occur only with appropriate supplementation.



Medium pasture availability

If your pasture is similar to that shown in Figure 2, you may be able to maintain reasonable animal production with appropriate supplementation. If the pasture mass falls below this level, then full feeding may be needed to protect the sustainability of the pasture.



Low pasture availability

If your pasture appears like that in Figure 3, then any further grazing will be detrimental to pasture survival and topsoil retention. Animals should be moved to other pastures or confined for full hand feeding.

