

Full drought feeding principles

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Introduction

When there is not enough pasture for livestock maintenance, or further grazing of pastures may be detrimental to pasture management or survival, the animals' nutritional requirements must be met by full hand feeding. When initiating a full feeding program, it is necessary to plan well before starting to feed.

Feed in a confined area

All stock in a full feeding situation should be confined to a small area or a small paddock for the following reasons:

- The extent of pasture and soil degradation will be limited.
- A close eye can be kept on stock for assessing their health.
- Stock do not have to expend excess energy walking around the paddock looking for food or water, and so the amount of feed required is reduced.

Choose an area where the pasture can be regenerated without any inconvenience after the drought breaks and any soil erosion will be minimised.

Livestock requirements

Water

Beware of stock becoming bogged in dams, soaks and waterholes. Fence off these areas and provide water in troughs. The inflow to the trough is as important as trough capacity.

Sufficient water must be supplied at all times. For example, under drought conditions sheep and cattle need about 1 L of water per 10 kg of bodyweight per day, and more in hot weather.

Water intake will increase with increasing temperature.

If water supply runs short, consider selling stock to reduce the need to cart water.

For more information, see Primefact 326 *Water requirements for sheep and cattle*.

Shade and shelter

If livestock are to be locked up in a confined area, adequate shade must be provided to prevent heat stress.

Animal welfare

See Primefact 327 *Animal welfare in drought*.

Troughs

It is best to place feed, especially grain, in a trough in order to prevent wastage. The trough does not need to be elaborate. Many cheap, temporary troughs are satisfactory, for example:

- bush timber or railway sleepers placed on the ground 30 cm apart, along a fenceline;
- 200 L drums split down the middle;
- tractor tyres cut in half with a chainsaw;
- rubber belting or corrugated iron held in place with stakes.

Provide sufficient length of trough so that all stock can eat together. When feeding cattle, allow 30 cm of trough length per head for weaners, 45 cm for yearlings, and 60 cm for adult stock. (Adult sheep will require 15 cm of trough space when feeding daily, or as little as 7 cm when feeding less frequently.) To reduce bullying, provide several troughs spread apart instead of one long trough.

If no troughing is available:

- for cattle, place the grain in dumps, each about 20 kg;
- for sheep, trail the grain.

Trailing is not suitable if soil surface is cracked or excessively dusty.



Dumps are not as efficient as troughs – a wastage of 6–8% can be expected. Another disadvantage is that there is a higher risk of sand impaction of the rumen.

Management tips

Preparing for full feeding

- Do not feed sheep and cattle together.
- Where necessary, draft stock into management groups based on weight and body condition. Stock are best confined to small paddocks close to feed supplies so that they can be better supervised and managed.

Dehorning

If cattle have not been dehorned by the start of the drought, they are better left alone than being subjected to the extra stress of dehorning. Ideally, stock should have been dehorned as part of normal management. In a drought, polled or dehorned cattle are less aggressive at the feed trough, and so less troughing is required.

Heifers

If you decide not to sell maiden heifers, they are best withheld from joining. If they are joined, you must feed them to ensure they will develop adequately before calving.

Cows

Pregnancy-test all cows that have been joined and sell any that are not in calf. Cows that are in calf need close supervision.

Problems may develop during calving because drought conditions lead to a higher proportion of calving difficulties and retained afterbirths. Metabolic disorders (such as milk fever) are also more likely to occur. Cows will do better if fed separately from their calves as this is more feed efficient and feed quality is less important.

Calves

It may be better to sell calves shortly after they are born, particularly those from first and second calvers. Those you keep should be weaned as early as possible. For more information, see Primefact 322 *Feeding calves in drought*.

Shy feeders

Draft off shy feeders, and either feed them separately or sell them.

Hay

Do not feed livestock with hay alone.

Preventative health measures

Parasites

- Treat all stock for lice and worms, as parasite burdens can be greater when stock are concentrated in small areas.
- Poor nutrition may cause stock to have a lower resistance to parasite infestation.
- Do not overlook the need to treat for fluke in areas likely to harbour this parasite e.g. low, wet, swampy areas.
- Bulls are highly susceptible to ostertagia infestations (small brown stomach worm).

Vaccination

- A 5-in-1 (or 7-in-1) vaccination given to all stock (including bulls) before grain feeding provides cheap insurance against losses from clostridial diseases.
- Vitamin A, D, E injection (intramuscular) is essential for all classes of cattle.

Further information

For further information on animal health in drought, see Primefact 333 *Cattle health during drought – common diseases and preventative management*.

Acknowledgment

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