

Managing dairy cattle in drought

Ross Coomber

Former Livestock Officer (Dairy Industry)

Herd numbers and feeding levels must be constantly assessed during feed shortages. Reducing stocking pressures by agistment or culling and selling are ways of coping with feed shortages. Whatever way you decide to manage your herd during feed shortages, grouping stock according to feed priorities is extremely important.

Groups of stock

Early to mid lactation milkers are the main cash earners and require high intakes of good quality feed to maintain moderate to high levels of production. These stock are the most responsive to improved feeding levels.

Cows in late lactation will utilise feed to maintain their body weight rather than to produce milk. They should be maintained at a minimum condition score of 4.5 to 5.0 (on the 1 to 8 scale).

Forward springers should be treated the same as early milkers. It is essential to feed to prevent calving problems and to maintain a condition score of at least 5.0 to allow suitable levels of milk production, milk composition and fertility.

Backward springers in poor condition that are expected to calve within 2 months require supplementation to maintain weight or make some weight gains. Stock in moderate to good condition should be held at this condition while stock with long dry periods can be fed a maintenance ration.

Unmated heifers are the future milkers. If fed a maintenance ration they should be left unjoined. Actual numbers essential for a replacement program should be determined to allow proper attention to a reduced and selected number of stock.

It is undesirable to feed weaners a maintenance ration for an extended period of time.

Selecting a small group that can be correctly fed to maintain growth is the best strategy.

Calves can be fed a milk replacer once they have received colostrum for the first 24 hours.

They may be weaned from milk onto dry feed at 4–6 weeks providing they are eating 0.5 kg to 0.75 kg of high protein concentrates a day.

Selective reduction of stock

Even if cattle prices are low, it is often more economical to sell sub-standard stock during feed shortages and droughts than to hold on to them. Early disposal of low producers, poor quality replacements and problem cows in good condition reduces the total cost of feeding and increases the price received from their sale.

The availability and cost of agistment depends on the extent and duration of the dry spell. The reduction in stock numbers places less stress on your property, and reduces the time and cost of feeding surplus stock. Your property will also recover more rapidly at the end of the poor seasonal conditions.

Agistment considerations

- Supervision to prevent unwanted matings and to ensure safe calving of springers.
- Safe paddocks to prevent accidents (e.g. no drains, swamps or bogs) and to stop stock from straying.

Stock husbandry

- When there is no paddock feed, confining stock to small paddocks allows better supervision and reduces the amount of energy spent walking.
- Shade in summer and shelter in winter reduce the amount of food used for thermal comfort.
- Ensure adequate water supplies.
- Separate stock into production groups or weight groups to improve feeding schedules. Young stock should be separated from older stock to prevent bullying and ensure adequate feed intake.



- Stock stressed by drought conditions have an increased susceptibility to internal and external parasites. If infected they require treatment, but care should be taken to avoid stress on weak, underfed stock.
- Ensure that all stock are also protected against clostridial diseases (e.g. blackleg, pulpy kidney).
- Cows calving in poor condition require close supervision to reduce problems associated with calving difficulties and metabolic disorders.

Further information

The NSW Department of Primary Industries website has a wealth of information available at www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/drought

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