Droughts are part of life for farming communities. Early planning and decision making is important. If decisions are left until a drought worsens, many of the management options available early may no longer be possible.

This chapter looks at how to prepare your farm, including:

- **making plans early**
- **knowing feed supplies and stock requirements**
- **understanding farm water levels and stock needs**
- **discussing your drought strategy with your family.**

The first step is to prepare a Drought Action Plan.

By listing the farm's financial and physical resources the effects of various strategies, both short and long term, can be calculated.

The next step is to estimate when you think the weather pattern is likely to change. This will affect your calculations on how long you will be feeding cattle, how much it will cost and whether you will decide to sell stock or not. It is best to over-estimate the time you expect to hand-feed stock to be on the safe side. For example, you need to add a few weeks beyond an expected autumn break to allow for the new pasture to germinate and grow, plus continue supplementation to allow for the transition from dry feed to green pasture. In previous droughts, cattle have survived the dry summer months only to be lost with the sudden change to a green feed diet after the autumn break.

For long-term weather predictions see the following Bureau of Meteorology link: www.bom.gov.au

Useful information can also be found at agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/farm-management/newsletters-and-updates/the-break,-the-fast-break-and-the-very-fast-break-newsletters

Drought Action Plan

Think about the following questions when developing your Drought Action Plan.

What is your current financial situation?

- Cost out various feeding or selling scenarios.
- Prepare a 12-month cash flow budget.
- Use partial budgeting to explore various options.

Do you need financial advice?

- See a rural financial counsellor (see www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/drought/assistance/rural-financial-counselling-service).
- Discuss your plans with your accountant.
- Contact your bank manager.

How widespread is the drought?

- Is suitable agistment available? You need to check fences, water supplies and health status of potential agistment properties.
- Is droving an option? What are the regulations on droving in your local shires?

Water supplies (see Chapter 2)

- What is your farm's current water storage capacity?
- What are the stock water requirements over the summer months?
- Do you have adequate water supplies to survive a drought?
- Can you seek water from other sources before supplies dry up (e.g. creeks, bores or outlying dams)?

Will you feed for maintenance or production targets (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6)?

- What are your fat score targets for the cow herd for joining, calving and weaning?
- What are the feeding needs of various classes of cattle?
- Which are the priority mobs for the best feed?
- Which classes of cattle do you consider selling?

Can you feed cattle for long periods? (see Chapters 7, 8, 10)

- Do you have the equipment to feed cattle: silos, feed wagons, grain feeding equipment or can you improvise, borrow or buy equipment?
- Do you have the labour or time to feed?
- How long will you have to feed and what will it cost? Are grain, hay, silage, pellets or other feedstuffs available?
- Can you construct a stock containment area for some or all of your cattle?
- Do you have the feed budget skills?

Should you reduce your cattle numbers?

- What prices are cattle making now?
- What prices will cattle be after the drought?
- What effect will reduced stock numbers have on your overall feeding costs and your long-term restocking costs?

Sustainability and protection of pastures and soil (see Chapter 3)

- What effect will your strategy have on your pastures and soils?
- What effect will your action plan have on your long-term viability?
- How do you protect native vegetation from cattle damage during the drought?

Cattle need to be adequately fed, have continual access to clean fresh water, have access to shelter if required, be kept healthy and allowed to express their natural behaviour. Allowing stock to starve is not an option and is an offence under Victorian law.

Your Drought Action Plan should be flexible to allow for changes in circumstances. For example, you may sell a certain class of stock or buy fodder only if conditions do not improve by a certain date.

Having a plan of action will greatly reduce the stress on you and your family as you will all be working towards specific aims.

Tips from past droughts

Farmers who successfully survived the 1982 and 1994 droughts were asked what they did to ensure they got through. In summary, they:

- made plans and took actions early
- did simple budgets for various feeding and selling options
- knew their hay supplies and were prepared to ration roughage
- prepared cash flow budgets for 2-3 years
- obtained advice on current market prices for fodder, grain and livestock to enable them to make informed decisions
- reviewed decisions regularly
- acted quickly and decisively
- looked for opportunities
- remained positive
- planned a holiday
- looked out for family and friends
- were prepared to use stock containment areas to preserve their pastures and soil.

Management options to consider

Agistment

Sending cattle away on agistment can be a cheap solution to the feeding problem; any cattle left at home will have less competition for feed.

Before agisting cattle check that the property they are going to has:

- secure fencing and cattle-handling facilities
- a good quantity of quality feed
- good water supply
- supervision to minimise theft and identify health problems.

Only cattle strong enough to travel should be agisted. It is an advantage to have the agistment area close to markets so cattle do not have to be brought home again.

Sell stock

If you choose this course of action, the crucial management decisions will be the timing of the sale and the type and number of cattle to be sold.

Any drought inevitably triggers a period of intense selling with large saleyard yardings and resultant depressed prices. Plan to sell as early as possible to avoid the most depressed prices and while the cattle are still in good condition.

The best policy is to sell the less-productive animals, so that at the end of the drought you will still have a herd of high-producing animals.

Generally, the best cattle to retain through a drought are young breeders of good quality because these will be difficult and expensive to replace at the end of a prolonged drought. They will also provide the basis for bringing a beef herd back into production.

The following sets out the steps of a selling policy to retain a breeding herd:

- Pregnancy test and sell all empty, late-calving and low-producing cows.
- Sell inferior bulls.
- Sell aged cows, aged bulls and lightweight heifers.
- Sell non-breeding cattle: weaners, yearling steers and bullocks. Growing stock can be expensive to feed because of their high energy and protein demands.
- Wean calves over three months of age and sell or feed separately.
- Progressively reduce the breeding cow herd. Reassess the cow herd and sell the poorest performing cows and heifers. Young breeders (2-5 years) are the most important to retain.

Feed costs, saleyard prices and expected stock water supplies need to be assessed each time you decide how many stock to sell.

Vendor declarations must be provided with all cattle sold. Vendor declarations are available from Meat and Livestock Australia and can be ordered online at www.mla.com.au

Taxation can have an important bearing on your selling plans. Its impacts, especially if a large part of the herd is to be sold, need to be determined before the stock are sold, particularly where low 'cost price' valuations are used for taxation purposes. Speak to your accountant about the possibility of spreading the income over a five-year period if the cattle sale was forced due to drought conditions.

Feed stock

Drought feeding of cattle is most efficient if the stock are segregated into various classes so that they can be fed according to their nutritional requirements.

These classes could be:

- early-weaned calves (less than six months)
- weaners (6-12 months)
- yearlings (12-18 months)
- cows with calves at foot
- dry cows
- bulls
- steers and bullocks (over 18 months).

Stock requirements are discussed in Chapter 6.

Developing feed budgets before and during a drought is key to minimising the financial impact on your enterprise.

It is usually more efficient to maintain stock at a productive level than feed to increase their weight and fat score. Cows maintained in fat score 3 or better will be more fertile come joining time and result in more live calves on the ground when the season improves.

Short-term finishing rations may be justified for stock suitable for sale, such as weaners or steers for domestic markets. However, budgets need to be carefully calculated as the profit margins are generally small during droughts.

Monitoring and recording cattle liveweight and fat scores gives a guide to the success of your feeding program and allows for ration adjustment and cost savings.

Planning is needed for when the drought finally breaks to ensure the cattle are slowly transitioned from a drought ration to the emerging green feed diet. For the benefit of both the cattle and the emerging pastures, the drought ration should be maintained for a few weeks, gradually transitioning the stock to the green feed, which allows the rumen microbes and the animals' digestive systems to adjust to the new diet.

Other considerations

Requirements for stock leaving the farm

All cattle in Victoria must be tagged with an NLIS cattle tag before leaving their property of birth. All movements must be accompanied by a properly completed National Vendor Declaration (www.mla.com.au/lqs or ring 1800 683 111).

Property-to-property movements need to be recorded on the NLIS database.

Fit to travel

Stock must be in a fit condition if they are to be transported, whether for slaughter or to another farm. An animal is not fit if it:

- is not strong enough to undertake the journey
- cannot walk normally, bearing weight on all legs
- is severely emaciated or visibly dehydrated
- is suffering from severe visible distress or injury
- is blind in both eyes
- is in late pregnancy.

For the full publication 'Is it fit to load' go to: www.mla.com.au/News-and-resources/Publication-details?pubid=5873

Droving

Another source of off-farm feed is along roadsides.

Only some shires allow droving stock. Legal restrictions and local environmental considerations applying to this practice vary between shires and may change. The risk of disease spread also needs to be considered. Check with the shires involved before starting this option.

Humane destruction

If some classes of stock are unsaleable, and no other option is feasible, the animals should be humanely destroyed. In past droughts, shires have made facilities available to dispose of carcasses.

Information on appropriate methods of destruction can be obtained from animal health staff from your local Agriculture Victoria office.

Purchasing cattle after the drought

To minimise the risk of introducing disease, cattle should be accompanied by an animal health statement. completed by the person you are buying the cattle from. The animal health statement pro forma can be downloaded from www.farmbiosecurity.com.au/toolkit/declarations-and-statements/ The statement will give you information on the cattle's pestivirus and Johne's disease status, treatments they may have received such as worm and liver fluke drenches and any current vaccinations they have received.

In summary

It is your legal responsibility to ensure that livestock do not starve or become distressed during a drought. Doing nothing is not an option open to you in the long term. Even in the short term, it is of questionable value.

You may be tempted to do nothing in the hope that a poor season will not turn into a drought. In the meantime, paddock feed diminishes, the condition and value of stock slip and feed prices soar. These changes close off many of the options available to you earlier in a drought.

The message is to plan early and set deadlines to activate specific actions.

Remember, it is better to plan ahead. If the season happens to improve or was not as dry as predicted, you can always put the plan to one side and continue with a normal season program.

Drought Action Plan template

Use this template to clarify your farm situation and help develop your Drought Action Plan

Farm Name	**Farm area (ha)**	**Month/Year**
Locality	**Time of calving**	**Time of lambing**

Cattle

Class of stock	**Herd Name**	**Number**	**Current fat score**	**DSE rating**	**Total DSE (number x DSE)**	**High priority (feed for production)**	**Medium priority (feed for maintenance)**	**Low priority (hold or sell)**	**Market options**	**Comments**
Weaners										
Calves at foot										
Heifers										
Steers										
1st calf heifers										
3-5 year-old cows										
6-year-old plus cows										
Bulls										
Total										

What feeds are on hand

Class of stock	Mob Name	Number	Current condition score	DSE rating	Total DSE (number x DSE)	High priority (feed for production)	Medium priority (feed for maintenance)	Low priority (hold or sell)	Market options	Comments
Weaners										
Lambs at foot										
Wethers										
Maiden Ewes										
Adult (>2 yr) Ewes										
Old age 6 yr plus Ewes										
Rams										
Total										

Other livestock

Class of stock	Group Name	Number	Current condition score	DSE rating	Total DSE (number x DSE)	High priority (feed for production)	Medium priority (feed for maintenance)	Low priority (hold or sell)	Market options	Comments
Horses										
Goats										
Alpaca										
Other										
Total										

Paddock feed summary

Storage type and location	Feed type (grain or hay)	Quantity: (number of bales)	Weight of bales (kg)	Total quantity (tonnes)	Estimated energy (ME)	Crude protein %	Fibre NDF %	Comments
Silo 1								
Silo 2								
Silo 3								
Hayshed 1								
Hayshed 2								
Hayshed 3								
Silage pit 1								
Silage pit 2								
Silage pit 3								
Total								

Paddock feed on hand

Paddock name	Area	Average kg/DM/ha	Estimated quantity	Comments
Total of farm				

Weekly water consumption

Number of hectares	X	Quantity of pasture	=	Total kg pasture on hand	divide by 1,000	=	Tonnes DM/farm
	X		=		divide by 1,000	=	

What water supplies are on hand

Water Source	Current Volumn (ML)	Access Yes/No	Quality suitable Yes/No	Salinity suitable Yes/No	Estimated weekly use	Estimate number of weeks	Estimated run out date	Comments
Dam 1								
Dam 2								
Dam 3								
Dam 4								
Bore 1								
Bore 2								
Creek								
River								
Town supply								
Neighbouring supply								
Total								

Paddock feed summary

Number of cattle	X	Daily consumption	X	7 days	=	Weekly consumption for cattle
	X	litres/day	X	7 days	=	litres /week
Number of sheep	X	Daily consumption	X	7 days	=	Weekly consumption for sheep
	X	litres/day	X	7 days	=	litres /week
House and garden	X	Daily consumption	X	7 days	=	Weekly consumption for house
	X	litres/day	X	7 days	=	litres /week
Total weekly water consumption litres/week						

Drought action planning check list

Discuss options with:

Family members	Yes/No
Accountant	Yes/No
Bank manager	Yes/No
Stock agent	Yes/No
Farm staff	Yes/No
Neighbours	Yes/No
Meat and wool extension staff	Yes/No
Feed merchant	Yes/No