

Livestock options in dry times

Brian Ashton

Sheep Consultancy Service Pty Ltd, Port Lincoln

EXTENSION



Key messages

- **Prepare for the next feed shortage now.**
- **The condition score of your stock will tell you if you are under- or over-feeding.**
- **Have a plan and act early.**
- **A containment area is a farm “risk management” asset.**

What happened?

In 2011 medic pastures were hit by powdery mildew. Many sheep suffered by lack of feed over the following summer and this greatly affected staple strength, micron, wool cut and lambing percentage in 2012.

We often suffer from a feed shortage, although the reason varies. Poor spring rains have been common in recent years while late breaks, or droughts, have occurred in the past. We know that a huge range in pasture production is a feature of our climate – we have dealt with it for many years.

Management options

Farmers manage in different ways. Now that sheep are worth money it's time to review how you plan to manage.

- Some people stock very conservatively – but they have reduced income in all the

average and above average years.

- Some sell immediately while the stock are still in good condition. This is OK if the price is reasonable.
- Some feed to maintain reasonable condition and production levels. This may involve a containment area if there is an erosion risk.
- The worst case is to feed less than they require, run out of feed, and then to sell when the sheep are poor and the prices are still depressed.

What does this mean?

Stock that you keep will need to be fed enough to maintain reasonable condition and production levels. The Lifetime Wool project gave us an excellent guide to help us determine this (visit www.lifetimewool.com.au for more information on ewe management and condition scoring). From mating until lambing, ewes should be maintained in condition score 3, or better.

The cost benefit ratio for this is clear. On average Merino ewes that are score 3 from mating to lambing will rear 15 percent more lambs than ewes at score 2. If they lose one condition score during pregnancy they will produce 0.8 kg less clean wool and their lambs will produce less wool for the rest of their lives.

These condition score losses were common on upper Eyre Peninsula in the summer of 2011/12. At current prices these losses equate to about \$30 per ewe. You could have bought a lot of feed for that.

If ewes drop below score 2 the production losses are even greater. As well, there will be ewe deaths. With current prices, and

animal welfare concerns, I believe it is unacceptable to let ewes drop below score 2.

What to do about it?

- Condition score a race full of your ewes 3 or 4 times every year - when they are in the yards. Do it more often in tough seasons.
- Draft off the ewes that may fall below score 2 and feed them more, either through supplementary feeding or access to better paddocks.
- Monitor pastures (bulk and quality) so you are not caught out.
- Have some feed reserve – or know where you can buy it. Cereal grain is the best value but some hay is really useful too.
- Keep some grain back after harvest until after the break and when the season is assured.
- In erosion prone districts set up a containment area so you are ready to go when needed.
- Keep a young flock because old sheep can become a liability.
- Improve your water supply, and fencing, so that you can utilise all your feed reserves.
- Pregnancy scan your ewes so that in tough years empty ewes can be shorn and sold early.
- Have a plan and act on it early.