



Bouncing back from drought



Planning for recovery from drought is important. Following **good rainfall**, it's important to consider **key factors** that can impact the **health of your flock and business.**

THE ESSENTIALS

- **Proactively manage** green feed diseases and sheep health coming out of containment feeding
- **Take stock** of pasture and pasture recovery before increasing stock numbers
- **Assess your options** for restocking, cashflow and equity with real numbers and budgets
- **Plan for recovery** and the next drought
- **Manage the 'normal' seasons** well and look for opportunities to improve
- **Seek advice** if you need to and look after yourself, your family, and your neighbours

MANAGE SHORT-TERM FEED ISSUES

Manage lush pasture

There are significant risks to sheep health associated with rapidly growing green feed.

Green pick weight loss	Green pick is incredibly palatable but has high moisture content. Stock will lose weight when chasing green pick, especially when in short supply, and it can be difficult to get them to eat a supplement. Take care with stock in poor body condition and consider containment feeding to manage them or defer grazing.
Pulpy kidney	Pulpy kidney (enterotoxaemia) is a fatal clostridial disease that can occur when stock transition onto a high-quality diet. Vaccination is very effective and if stock have not been vaccinated in the three months prior to transitioning to lush feed, it is best to vaccinate at least 10 days prior.
Toxic plants	Many different plants may flourish after drought breaking rain. Some of these may be toxic all the time, while others are especially risky during the period of rapid transition. Keep an eye out for toxic plants or plants you do not recognise. Ensure hungry stock have a full gut before release by feeding hay in yards . Make sure the yards are trampled and hay is available before the arrival of purchased stock.
Other diseases	Other diseases to look out for include, but are not limited to, grass tetany, anthrax and heavy parasite burdens. Know the number for your local veterinarian or biosecurity officer so you can seek individual advice and support quickly.



Releasing stock from containment feeding

Managing the transition from containment feeding to pasture **must be done carefully** to minimise the risk of animal health issues and to avoid a break in the wool.

It is recommended that sheep are fed in the morning in containment pens before being released onto pasture later in the day when they are not hungry. Containment drought feeding should continue until pastures have recovered sufficiently to meet the requirements of the sheep. To make this transition as safe and productive as possible, read more at wool.com.

TAKE STOCK OF PASTURE¹

Pastures need **time to recover** following prolonged drought to remain productive. Pasture spelling, continued drought feeding, and prompt weed management, will help pasture recover in the shortest possible time.

Assessing your **feed availability** is an important first step in drought recovery. Below are some considerations for how to assess pasture quantity and quality and manage both short and long-term feed availability.

Supplementation and feeding

- **Maintain an adequate plane** of nutrition through supplementary feeding or continued containment feeding while pastures recover.
- The most appropriate **supplement ration** for your stock will depend on the condition of the sheep, the state of available grazing land, and your business objectives (maintenance or production).

Assessing pasture availability

Assessing **post-drought pasture availability** will help determine when to restock and/or how long you'll need to continue feeding. Tactics and resources to help you make an assessment and determine carrying capacity include:

- **Measure standing feed** by estimating the amount of pasture available using the appropriate [photo standard](#) for your pasture type or by taking pasture cuts. The Department of Agriculture and

¹ Content adapted from *FutureBeef Recovering From Drought Resource* by Hayley Eames, Rural Economic Development, Department of Agriculture & Fisheries (2020)

Fisheries and FutureBeef have resources and videos on how to conduct a [forage budget](#). The [FORAGE](#) and [VegMachine](#) programs can be helpful to estimate ground cover and standing feed. [The Feed On Offer Library](#) also contains photos and estimates for some Queensland pastures.

- Pasture recovery is impacted by the amount and intensity of rain received, the time of year in which the season broke, and the physical conditions at the time of rain. Consider the medium to long-term seasonal outlook and the subsequent possible impact on pasture growth, seeding and root reserves when determining a safe carrying capacity.
- To assist early pasture growth, allow at least six to eight weeks before grazing. Implement **grazing management strategies** such as delayed restocking, spelling paddocks and restricting stock to containment areas.
- Determine the proportion of **productive, palatable, and perennial (3P) grasses** in the paddock. Assessing pasture species composition and survival will help you determine if there's any pasture damage and the recovery potential. Managing your land condition will also help you ensure you are cultivating resilient pastures for future droughts.

RESTOCKING AND PLANNING AHEAD

Before rushing out to restock with purchased stock, take the time to do your own calculations and if unsure, seek help from a trusted advisor. Consider your financial position, in particular your equity, access to capital and [cashflow](#). Having **good plans and budgets** to show lenders can be critical.

When considering **how to restock** there are several options—breeding back, trading stock or buying in breeding stock. Another alternative is taking on agistment. They all have risks, and most people will likely use a combination.

Breeding back is usually a slow process, although strategies such as [double joining might be worth considering](#) if the season is very good. Trading requires careful consideration of expected returns and feed budgets to manage risk to the business at a vulnerable time. Buying breeders back can be expensive which could place pressure on debt levels as well as on short-term cash flow.

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The value of having an **up-to-date budget** when deciding on options cannot be underestimated. Having a clear understanding of income expected can assist proactive decisions around spending, debt repayment negotiations and assist with deciding on the recovery method to use.

After rain is the perfect time to do a **Drought Management Plan** for the next drought and to review how you went in the previous drought while it is still fresh in your mind. Consider what new or different strategies could help you better prepare for any future dry periods, such as Farm Management Deposits, fodder storage, weigh scales, market/trading and flock structure flexibility or improving infrastructure for containment feeding.

Refining **key management strategies** can also help in 'normal' seasons. Strategies around timing of joining and **weaning** and age of retention can ensure you are maximising feed availability and managing mortality risks, especially with older ewes in dry times.

There are several resources available to inform decision making:

- **Comparing options:** The free [Sheep GM](#) spreadsheet, developed for sheep producers in western Queensland, can help you to estimate how you will make the most from the feed you have available using gross margins.
- **Biosecurity considerations:** The '[Be ready for restocking](#)' fact sheet identifies key risks and simple management strategies for Queensland sheep producers preparing to restock.
- **Planning for success:** The '[Drought Planning Template](#)' can help plan for short-term seasonal variation and assist you to identify key strategies to manage risks in your business. There is also a useful list of [drought resources](#) for sheep producers, covering potential drought management strategies.
- **Decision making:** The '[Financial management during drought recovery](#)' checklist and fact sheet can help assess your financial options to make good decisions.
- Find out more on **available funding options** via [Farmhub.org.au](#).

TOP TIPS FROM THE Paddock:

- **Ensure your rams are ready and your ewes are in good condition** to get the best possible reproduction rates. Effective predator control is essential at least one month before lambing starts.
- **Consider your options to maximise productivity and feed efficiencies**, such as utilising condition scoring for adult sheep, pregnancy scanning or weight data for growing stock to further refine management.
- **Ensure the areas around troughs and feeders are built up** so animals have easy access to feed and water and ensure by-washes are sound and pipes into dams are clear of debris so nothing obstructs inflow of water.
- **Be on the front foot for flystrike and worms.** The risk of **flystrike** is greatest during warm and wet condition and increases significantly when there is enough rain to keep the sheep's skin moist for two days or more. Worm burdens can become a problem as little as six weeks after rain that has resulted in green pick. Head to the [ParaBoss website](#) if you need a refresher.
- **Check in on your neighbours.** Recovering from drought can be more stressful than managing drought, so it's ok not to be ok. Some may not have received the same rainfall as you and may not be experiencing the same relief that you are feeling.



If you have an important local issue or are seeking further information please get in contact with your local Leading Sheep Regional Coordinator. Find them at: www.leadingsheep.com.au/about-us/regions/.