

# Managing Drought

## **Rule Number One: Keep the production loss confined to the drought.**

Reducing feed demand is an important factor in managing drought. Often deer farmers are caught with the weaning decision right in the middle of drought. Weaning is a significant opportunity to reduce overall demand.

Rule Number One applies both to animal and pasture production.

The weaning decision is important both now and if it rains. We still need to get the hind back in calf, we need to prioritise feed to the calf, and we need to make sure we get the most from our pastures as we head into winter.

### ***What are the risks associated with not weaning?***

Often we leave the hind and calf together to try to maximise weaning weight. The risk is that we compromise next year's productivity of the hind.

### **Lost condition in the hind**

When pastures get short then the hind cannot harvest enough grass to meet her requirement. For example, a hind on covers of 900 kg DM/ha (2cm long), may only be able to eat about 75% of her daily requirement. This means she has to use her body condition to buffer the rest. That means she may be losing up to 300 g/d, which adds up to 1 BCS in about a month.

### **Lower weaning weight of the calf**

Hinds on low pasture covers will wean smaller calves. In a recent research trial at Invermay low covers during summer meant that calves were 6 to 10 kg lighter at weaning. This means that it is important to take control of the calf's nutrition by weaning, as the calf does not compete well with the hind when pasture is short.

### **Next year's production**

The flow-on effect of losing a condition score on your hinds is poor pregnancy rate and later calving. One BCS lost may be seen as an increase in dry rate by 5-10%, and a delay in calving by 7-10 days. This translates into a reduction of 7-12 calves less weaned/100 hinds mated and a weaning weight that is 5-6 kg lower next year.

### ***What are the benefits in feed saving?***

Weaning will save feed. The weaned hind will only need about 2 kg DM/d and the calf about 1.5 kg DM/d. When left unweaned they will need between 4 and 5 kg DM/d to prevent BCS loss in the hind. Weaning will save between 12 and 20% in feed demand.

### ***What about supplementary feeding?***

A kilogram of liveweight lost substitutes 2 kg DM, so this would cost approximately \$0.70/kg if barley was used as a supplement to prevent weight loss.

If we wait until the grass grows to replace that loss then it takes about 5 kg DM/kg live weight. This then costs \$1.75/kg. (barley at \$350/t)

So you save about \$1/kg liveweight potentially lost by supplementing now.

These factors all combine to make weaning well worthwhile. It not only works out better for the animal and pastures but also gives the staff something to do that is positive.

### ***Protecting future pasture production***

Keeping pressure on recovering pastures by eating all that is produced will reduce their potential growth rates and slow their recovery.

Keeping pastures at below 1000 kg DM/ha will reduce production by up to 25%. This could be as much as 25 kg DM/ha/d. This will be important as we head towards winter, as the lost production over a month could be as much as 750 kg of pasture cover per ha. Hence it is important to continue to actively manage all of our feed resources in the autumn after a drought to make sure that we are not still paying for the drought next spring due to poor winter feeding.

So, even after a drought, the low pasture covers may still keep performance and intake below optimal. This means that we need to give the pasture time to recover by strategic use of supplements even after it rains.

Check out the suggestions for pasture management at [grassland.org.nz](http://grassland.org.nz)

