Post drought - what to consider on the farm

Are there lessons from the 2013 drought for deer farmers?

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The advice given at the time of a drought is to try to 'pay' for it in the year it occurs, not transfer it through to the following year in terms of lost animal and pasture performance. This advice is easier to give than to plan for but it provides a good starting point for looking back to some lessons learnt from last season.

It also ties in with focussing on maximising income rather than reducing costs. The scope to improve profitability by reducing costs is limited as most farm costs are fixed. With good planning and management, any money available during difficult times can be targeted to achieve the best return on each dollar spent. Top farmers spend relatively more on productive inputs, such as fertiliser, animal health, and weed and pest control.

Planning and benchmarking - while the drought is a recent memory it is a good time to revisit and analyse some of the decisions made on farm last autumn as the drought stretched on. As Tom Fraser is fond of reminding farmers "it's a good idea to write down what you did because we all forget." Droughts may happen slowly when compared to a flood or snow event, but with planning, decisions can be made early and in small bites, it doesn't have to be an all or nothing approach.

Making farms more resilient

It is important to consider the long term resilience of the farm operation if weather systems are going to be more variable with the predicted extremes of longer and more frequent dry periods as well as more intense rainfall events. This year the rain that finally broke the drought in many areas was significant. For example the Wellingtons have had near record rainfall since April.

Were there options overlooked that could be considered as a future option?

Flexible stock policy

Is the overall stocking rate on the property flexible enough? Which class of stock can be readily sold (cattle trading policy, hogget lambs) or purchase decisions delayed (winter lambs).

The images below were typical for many areas of the North Island in March and again in July after rain.

Hawkes Bay, March 2013

Wellingtons, Wharepapa South, July 2013

Did you sell stock early enough?

Often what seems a poor price at the beginning of a drought looks great in hindsight. Continuing to hold stock that is intended for sale impacts on the feed supply for capital stock and hence on next year's lambing or calving.

Remember to bring culling decisions forward as well. Check the state of stock that might be at risk (older or

low condition) and add them to the list of those that might be sold if the need arises. Also check back on records of velvetting stags to see which ones might go, or think about whether all of the weaner stags may be needed. It may be better to forgo a season of genetic gain for proven weight from older stags.

Best use of feed supplements that are available

In a drought it is still important to balance the ration, feed adequate amounts and transition stock onto the feed. Timing and the use of supplements is also critical as droughts often impact on mating and hence next year's performance.

Sometimes it is better to sell the balage and buy back barley when you check the cost-benefit of feed types.

It is always more costly in terms of feed to put live-weight back on in the following year. Generally you can count on 1 kg of live weight lost to substitute for 2 kgDM of feed. However, it will usually cost you another 6 kgDM to get that live weight back later.

Planting alternate species to buffer the feed supply

This will depend greatly on each farm as to the suitability of different species. This could include deeper rooting species such as lucerne, chicory, sub clover and plantain. To integrate these species into a farm requires better understanding of their agronomy, management and grazing requirement so they are not a short term solution.

Using tree pruning's as fodder

There has been research work done in the past on the use of trees as fodder and on any farms there is an opportunity to plant some marginal areas into willow for example to provide feed in serious dry spells. One option would be to plant fodder trees for use as a feed bank on a farm.

There are some online resources available for a quick read on this topic to get you started.

Cost analysis of tree fodder http://www.nzffa.org.nz/farm-forestry-model/resource-centre/tree-grower-articles/tree-grower-february-2008/cost-benefit-analysis-of-tree-fodder/

Fodder from trees http://www.lifestyleblock.co.nz/lifestyle-file/running-the-farm/feed-and-forage/item/268-fodder-from-trees.html

A guide to fodder tree crops http://www.treecrops.org.nz/2013/03/06/forage/

Waikato regional council guide to trees http://www.waikatoregion.govt.nz/PageFiles/3354/section1.pdf

For a more detailed resource there is a book available - **Using Trees on Farms** -$15 (P&P incl) http://www.grassland.org.nz/books.php

Pastures and drought recovery

First steps - Start by growing more grass

- keep stock off if possible when it rains to allow grass time to recover
- slow rotation,
- use strategic nitrogen,
- regrassing

Once it rains pastures begin to recover. However recovery is likely to be different on every paddock on the farm, but, pastures will fall in to 2 main groups - those that are going to recover (all be it quickly or slowly) and those that wont.

What happens in a drought? - as the plants productivity and persistence is determined by its tiller production the hot dry summer/autumn impacts on the plants major tillering periods - unless the plants get a chance to tiller when autumn rains occur the pasture will thin out in winter and following years production is likely to be impacted.

Poor pasture recovery is likely to mean an increase in weed growth in the bare gaps. Proactive farmers can take the opportunity to identify their worst paddocks and begin to plan their management strategy.

Look for long term solutions to feed gaps not short term options. For example, sowing large areas of short term ryegrass provides winter feed but transfers the shortage through to next summer.

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