

Being prepared and in control: Putting strategies in place

In this article the focus is on putting in place strategies that work, and happen at the right time.

The hard fact is that we are farming to make a profit, and we can not do that by consistently selling onto a drought-weakened market, or when a lack of stock water or feed limits options.

Make a plan and stick to it

Deciding on exactly what stock you want to winter is the first step. Take the time to work through the calculation of what stock you will be trading this season. The variable is when the action will be taken. The gap between what you would like to do, and what you need to do will depend on both stock condition and how the season progresses.

Make some assumptions about how you expect the season to progress, and set targets and triggers that reflect the uncertainty, for example:

- “to meet my target of 50 percent of sale lambs gone by 10 February, I need growth of 23kg DM/ha/day in December and 20kg DM/ha/day in January.”
- “to be assured of that growth I will need at least 60mm of rain in November and 90mm in December.”
- “if this is not received, at the end of November hogget lambs will be weaned and sold.”
- “an additional 300 lambs will be sold.”
- “by 10 January we will sell:
 - an additional 500 lambs.
 - 30 one-and-a-half year cattle.”

Plan your actions to be small but regular, keeping ahead of the developing situation.

Remember, you need 30–45mm of rain each fortnight to balance the amount of moisture lost from soil and pasture. So, if you are tempted to delay taking action, ensure that you have enough safety margins.

Prioritise and be objective

Stock condition is critical, for both capital and trading stock. Weighing is essential to really focus the decisions and eliminate the excuses. A weigh-up at weaning, of ewes, ewe lambs, two-tooths and trading lambs, will set the scene for the challenge ahead. You may be surprised – the ewes may have regained a lot of condition and only a small summer weight gain be required.

Weighing will help you set priority mobs and classes. Later-born hogget lambs may really compromise options, so be realistic. The replacement hogget is a much higher priority than the lamb.

Review regularly and act early

As the season progresses, keep on top of what is happening. It is easy to become busy with day-to-day activities. So you need to set aside time to keep in touch with the whole farm probably at least once every 14 days.

Being “on the ball” and acting early means a number of small actions can be effective. It is only when we delay, and get caught out with few options that the big steps have to be taken.

Water and feed

On some properties stock water may become more of a limitation than feed. Ensure paddocks with limited water are grazed early and areas in which feed is being built up have good water that allows the area to be grazed later in the season.

Secure options now

The best plans for action can still hurt if the market is weak or markets are unavailable.

Committing to a supply contract with a proportion of stock can be very effective in ensuring plans are achievable. It provides a focus and priority for your planning and can ensure that your expectations are able to be met in the event of an over-supply of stock in the market.

This approach can be extended by accepting a forward fixed price contract for stock, which further minimises the downside resulting from a weakened supply market.

The obligation to supply is implicit, but with good planning, regular monitoring and review, and early action, committing a proportion of your stock to contracted supply can be a good strategy.

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