



Feed Shortage 2018/19

Dairy herd management strategies

Culling decisions in a drought

Culling and production priorities

Many farmers facing challenging conditions and higher feed costs may consider culling a proportion of their herd to improve short-term cash flow and control input costs. While a well-planned culling strategy can improve the bottom line, animal health and welfare implications must be considered alongside your farm business goals.

Use a three-step strategy to select cows to cull during drought:

1. Determine the number of cows you can feed based on your inventories and availability. Consider sitting down with a consultant and using Dairy Australia's online feed budgeting tools and resources.
2. Rank cows according to pregnancy status, stage of lactation, age, current milk yield, health, temperament, somatic cell count and previous bouts of mastitis.
3. Begin working from the bottom of the list and cull cows until you reach a sustainable herd size.

When culling more stock than usual, consider the long-term implications on your herd and production.

Generally, cows will be sold on a reduced market and restocking could be difficult once conditions improve. Your decisions must be flexible, reassessed routinely and adjusted as circumstances change.

Selecting animals to cull

The level of destocking to undertake will differ from farm to farm. Underfeeding, particularly fresh lactating cows, negatively affects body condition, production, health and reproduction. Dry cows off early and destock more heavily to reduce feed demands and allow better nutrition for more responsive animals. As a guideline, the destocking list could include the following livestock:

- › Non-pregnant cows, especially aged 5 years or over and difficult to get pregnant.
- › Cows with elevated somatic cell counts or with more than one bout of mastitis during the current lactation.
- › Cows with high cell counts for two lactations even after dry cow treatment during last dry period.
- › Slow milkers or cows whose temperament prolongs milking time or impedes flow in the dairy.

Key messages

- Destocking is based on feed cost and availability — monitor milk price versus cost of feed per litre
- If destocking, urgently identify the number and class of animals to be fed or sold
- Sell cull cows early to reduce production costs
- Cull poor performing cows first
- Keep the best genetics in the herd for as long as possible
- Observe any medicine and antibiotic meat withholding periods
- Destocking has long-term impacts on business profitability and ability to rebound, and should be carefully considered — seek advice from your accountant, bank manager and farm advisers

- › Low producers and cows in poor health and body condition.
- › Heavily culling heifers and calves will reduce the feed requirements for the herd, allowing the scarce remaining feed to go toward lactating cows that will return income. This should be considered carefully, especially if also heavily culling the milking herd. Low replacement numbers will negatively affect the genetic progress and the fertility of your herd (younger animals are more fertile) and may be expensive to buy in the future. Having enough heifers coming through will affect your business's ability to rebuild production in future seasons.
- › Herd bulls that can be replaced when needed.
- › Other livestock that do not contribute directly to cash flow

Animal welfare

Livestock management, stocking rates and nutrition are closely linked to animal health and welfare. Consider the best ways to adjust stocking rates and manage feed supplies for livestock.

During a drought, tough decisions need to be made and producers who have drought-affected stock should consider whether all decisions are humane and reasonable. Delaying destocking can seem reasonable but result in fewer options for selling into the market. Act early while stock are fit and strong.

If stock are suffering, take action immediately by feeding or agisting the stock. Where cash flow prevents taking action, animals must be sent for slaughter or humanely destroyed if they cannot be transported. Animals that are sick, injured, severely lame, blind, heavily pregnant, weak or emaciated should not be transported. For a complete understanding of the standards for the transportation of livestock, visit:

mla.com.au/research-and-development/animal-health-welfare-and-biosecurity/transportation/

Meat withholding periods

Develop a culling plan that considers animals treated with medicines or antibiotics prior to being sold for slaughter. Specific meat residue withholding periods are based on dosage and route of administration of the drug used, and appear on the label. If you are unsure what period should be observed following treatment of an animal with a registered drug, consult your vet, particularly if the drug has been used off-label.

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