



Considerations for landholders after rain

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Rainfall after a prolonged dry spell presents landholders with a number of challenges and opportunities. Rain has fallen in many areas of the North West after a significant period of drought. Much of it has fallen on relatively bare soil, and there have been significant runoff events from relatively low amounts of rain. Subsoil moisture accumulation in fallows and pastures in many cases will be less than expected, and producers will need to plan for reduced moisture storage efficiency in the short term. The first step in planning is to assess available soil moisture; through push probes, agronomist consultations, simulation software or soil pits.

Short term feed options

In the short term, most options are relatively risky as rainfall in March and April are on average lower than during the summer months, while temperatures and plant moisture use can remain relatively high.

The rain has encouraged early planting of winter forages which is potentially risky if conditions do turn hot and dry again resulting in poor establishment and production. This risk may be justified in cases where ongoing feeding is depleting cash and/or credit reserves.

A safer planting window for winter forages (mid-March and onwards) is not far away, and the rain has provided excellent opportunities in the short term to reduce weed populations in fallows.

Where paddocks intended for winter forage have large germinations of liver seed grass, this can be retained for short term feed rather than removed immediately for winter forages. This option will, however, result in greater weed seed burdens in future years.

Other options may include applying nitrogen to tropical grasses to increase production; in this case, an increase in production will depend on further rain to enable utilisation of additional nitrogen.



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For those considering grazing pastures in the near future and, particularly those buying stock, take care not to over-estimate the ability of pastures to meet the nutritional requirements of various classes of livestock.

Energy is the key driver in ensuring growth and production in livestock and the low energy and high moisture traits of fresh green pick in recovering pastures means that animals must graze for much longer to meet their nutritional requirements.

Given high moisture levels (up to 87% in some species) and low dry matter (DM), even continuous grazing would provide insufficient energy, especially for livestock during late pregnancy and lactation. Consider continued hand feeding until pasture production is sufficient to meet stock requirements.

Transition stock slowly from hand feeding onto pastures and continue to supply medium to high quality roughage to ensure livestock have sufficient fibre and energy. Moving from grains to pastures is a significant change for the rumen. Vaccinating with 5 in 1 will help prevent clostridial diseases from occurring.

Toxic plants may also present a greater risk in the next few months. Should the season turn wet and cold consider the higher energy requirements (up to 20%) and need for shelter under these conditions particularly for sheep off shears.

Stock acquisition

Many producers have stock numbers well below average and purchasing at present high prices runs a risk of the market turning against the buyer. For mixed farming operations an increased area of winter grain production may be an alternative option for greater cash flow and may involve a switch from dual-purpose varieties to shorter season grain only types.

For cattle producers with appropriate infrastructure, sheep may offer a better short-term alternative for increased cash flow.

For dedicated stock producers, low stock numbers may present an opportunity to commence re-establishment of permanent pastures while demand for feed is low. Remember that successful pasture establishment depends on good moisture storage and a low weed seed burden, both have been difficult to achieve in the last two years, and that pasture establishment is a longer term operation.

Livestock trading provides opportunities to increase short-term cash flow.

However, some things must be considered, including:

- Depending on where you are buying livestock from, they may be in poor condition. To optimise production in these animals it's important to ensure they have access to the appropriate levels of energy, protein and fibre.
- When supplementary feeding these animals consider mobbing into rough weights and sizes, this may help to reduce bullying and shy feeders.
- Isolate and vaccinate these animals before mixing in with stock on hand.

Cover Crops

In certain situations, i.e. very low ground cover and very low stored moisture a short term cover crop can assist in improving moisture infiltration and surface condition. Winter species are likely to be most appropriate from now onwards. To achieve benefit from cover crops a disciplined approach is required particularly in regards to removing the cover crop once sufficient biomass has been obtained.

Conclusions

Take time to collect information on soil moisture, pasture growth, ground cover, livestock condition short term weather forecasts. Use this information to make a well considered and realistic plan for the season. Avoid rash and ill-considered decisions.

More information

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