

Be ready for rebuilding

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A COMBINATION of high fodder prices and limited access to fodder due to seasonal conditions has forced producers to reduce core breeding animal numbers in some parts of the state.

While ongoing drought management is a reality for many producers, high returns from the sheep enterprise and the likelihood of high restocking costs have some producers starting to think about strategies to rebuild their flocks when the season breaks.

It can take two to three years to rebuild a flock, depending on the number of breeding ewes sold.

While buying replacement animals provides an opportunity to change direction or breeding objectives, many other factors will come into consideration.

Adequate finance is required if buying animals. The present level of debt is one factor to be considered. Breeding up numbers may be the less expensive option, but the reduced cash flow needs to be considered.

Producers with mixed operations may have other opportunities, such as increasing the area cropped, or allocating additional paddocks to hay, to help replenish feed stocks.

Trading animals has been an option in or following previous droughts, but stock may be in short supply and expensive given the widespread nature of the



FEEDING STRATEGY: Containment feeding during challenging seasons is better than overgrazing from a natural resource and animal welfare perspective.

challenging season.

Depending on when and how widespread opening rains are, options for agistment or sharefarming arrangements may be an alternative. Keep your ears open and identify opportunities early.

If breeding back or a combination of breeding and restocking are used, retaining older cast for age ewes, reducing culling levels of productive animals, and management to maximise lamb survival and weaning rates should be considered.

Pregnancy scanning, ensuring ewes have adequate nutrition and limiting mob size can improve lamb

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survival significantly.

Strategies to accelerate breeding are often considered. Potential strategies include mating ewe lambs, lambing three times in two years, and the use of treatments to increase ovulation rates of ewes or improve out of season breeding. Each of these strategies needs

lambs is generally lower, and mortality can be higher.

To maximise fertility they must be at 60 per cent of their mature bodyweight at mating.

They also require higher quality feed during pregnancy and lactation to account for the fact they are still growing.

Reaching target mating weights of ewe lambs during a drought and sustaining them adequately through pregnancy and lactation can be costly and difficult to achieve; young growing animals are often the first to suffer during drought.

Lambing ewes three times in two years is also consid-

ered by some producers.

This results in a lambing interval of eight months and timing of this varies but needs to consider that some sheep are seasonal breeders and are stimulated to cycle once day length begins to shorten. Merinos are the least sensitive, followed by the British breeds. Long wool breeds such as the Border Leicester are the most sensitive.

There are treatments available to aid out of season breeding and the use of teaser rams can also be considered.

Again, it is important to consider that nutrition and condition score of the ewes is critical for accelerated lambing to be successful and requires additional high quality feed not often originally budgeted for.

Treatments to increase ovulation rates in ewes are available, but they are not recommended for Merino ewes.

Ewes must be in optimal condition score and the nutritional needs of the ewes met throughout pregnancy and lactation.

It is important to cost out and budget any decision and understand the impacts on future income when making a recovery plan.

This is of particular importance if the business is in a tight financial situation, as poor decision-making now can have a significant effect on long-term business viability. Utilising all arable land to generate an income should be considered in line with available finance.

Identify trigger points in seasonal planning

PLANNING for 2019 should be front of mind for all producers.

Last year showed the extremes across SA with both drought and a bumper season occurring. It is important to review your present business position. What are the critical decisions that need to be taken, particularly if the 2019 season is poor?

While stocking rate is a key driver of profitability, it is important to ensure that it is managed to the season.

The break to the season is a key factor influencing carrying capacity, so determining trigger points (dates and strategies) can allow stocking rates to be optimised whatever the season.

It is particularly important to have a well-developed 'exit' strategy for late or poor breaks to the season.

Carrying capacity should be manipulated relative to the timing of the season break. Trigger points – dates at which actions must be implemented – should be established for your own situation.

There are a range of tactics that can be used to manage a late or poor break to the season.

Tactics to maintain carrying capacity

- Increase supplementary feeding to maintain stock condition and help sustain flock production, reproduction and sale value

- Buy extra feed early to obtain feed at a reasonable price and ensure sufficient feed is available

- Reduce crop and increase pasture to reduce winter stocking rate – although there will be less stubble area to graze in summer and early autumn

- Put stock in containment areas to preserve ground cover, protect top soils, and defer grazing pastures to increase leaf area and growth

- Apply nitrogen fertiliser to pastures to increase early growth and vigour of grasses

- Apply growth promotants, such as Gibberellic acid, on pastures to increase

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- winter and spring pasture growth

- Control pasture insects to increase winter and spring pasture growth

- Graze crops to defer grazing pastures and reduce supplementary feeding

- Strip grazing to increase pasture growth

- Rotational grazing to increase pasture growth

- Early weaning to maintain ewe condition and reduce the chance of carryover effects at the next joining.

Tactics to help reduce feed demand

- Pregnancy scan and sell dry stock and culls to reduce the stocking rate while maintaining the core breeders

- Secure off-farm agistment to reduce the stocking rate at home but maintain flock size for when the season breaks

- Make early stock sales to ensure surplus sheep do not consume summer feed

- reserves, leaving more for the core flock.

Recent failed springs have highlighted the importance of also having trigger points for the remainder of the season.

A failed spring does not happen overnight but slowly develops across weeks or even months.

To ensure you are in a position to act early, it is necessary to monitor rainfall and stored soil moisture during winter and into spring. Trigger points for this time of year should also be established for your own situation.

- Details: sheepconnectsa.com.au/blog/trigger-points-the-keys-to-seasonal-planning