

Managing the welfare of farm animals during drought - on farm, during transport, at saleyards and at slaughtering establishments

(adopted 06/06/2021)

The policies and positions of the RSPCA referred to in this document represent the guiding principles to which we aspire in fulfilling our various roles. We are committed to giving effect to these principles wherever possible and practical.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This position paper focuses on strategies for managing animals on farm during drought as well as managing drought-affected animals during transport, at saleyards and at slaughter. In the context of this position paper, drought-affected animals are those farm animals who are in poor condition¹ as a result of inadequate feed and inability to provide them with sufficient supplementary feed during drought.
- 1.2 This position paper provides information to assist those with a responsibility for the care of farm animals in ensuring their animals' welfare during extended dry periods and drought. It is recognised that comprehensive drought preparedness strategies include plans for managing animals on farm, building and maintaining feed reserves, ensuring access to adequate water supply, managing and monitoring the environment, and engaging with financial planners to develop and implement strategies to build up financial reserves.
- 1.3 RSPCA Australia recognises the critical need to address and mitigate climate change and its impacts through approaches including evidence-based policy, legislation, emission-reducing technologies, and structural changes. Where climate change mitigation strategies pose animal welfare risks, these risks must also be carefully considered.
- 1.4 It is the responsibility of the person in charge to ensure animal welfare is not compromised during drought and provide animals in their care with good nutrition, a suitable living environment, good health, the ability to express normal behaviours, and the opportunity to experience positive affective states.
- 1.5 Where financial assistance is provided to those with a responsibility to care for animals to prepare for drought and/or manage the impacts of drought (for example, through government assistance), this assistance should be incumbent upon the principles outlined in this position paper being met.
- 1.6 This position paper must be read in conjunction with the following RSPCA policies and position papers:
 - Mission, vision, objectives - [Good animal welfare](#)
 - Policy B - [Farm animals](#)
 - Policy F - [Transportation of animals](#)
 - Policy G - [Humane killing](#)
 - Position Paper B6 - [Welfare of farm animals at saleyards](#)
 - Position Paper G3 - [Welfare of animals at abattoirs and knackeries](#)

2 General management

- 2.1 RSPCA Australia strongly encourages drought preparedness and management strategies that aim to reduce the risk to farm animal welfare.
- 2.2 At all times, a person caring for and/or managing farm animals, must be aware of their role and understand their responsibilities to avoid the risk of causing pain, injury, suffering or distress to animals and promote good animal welfare outcomes. At the same time, persons responsible for managing farm animals should seek advice and assistance wherever needed - be that financial, technical

¹ Animals in poor condition will have hips, backbones and short ribs that are prominent and sharp to the touch with individual ribs clearly visible. In body condition scoring systems, these animals are described as score 1 out of 5 (beef cattle, goats and sheep) or score 1-3 out of 8 (dairy cattle).

or for mental health reasons - to ensure their personal wellbeing as well as that of the animals in their care. Persons responsible for managing farm animals should actively seek assistance from federal, state, territory and local governments, state farming organisations and community groups who are able to provide support, assistance and detailed advice on drought preparedness, management and recovery strategies.

- 2.3 Animals must have access to good quality drinking water, adequate (supplementary) feed, be provided with shade, be able to shelter from extremes of weather, and be protected from predators.
- 2.4 It is unacceptable for animals to be allowed to starve to death or die of thirst under any circumstance. Where there is any doubt as to the ability to provide animals with adequate feed and water, the decision to agist, sell or humanely kill must be made as soon as possible and well before the animal is suffering and/or too weak to be moved and while the animal is still fit to transport. Animals' body condition must be regularly assessed to facilitate timely decision making with regard to the most appropriate management strategy.
- 2.5 Daily monitoring by a competent person or persons must be carried out to ensure sick or weak animals are quickly identified and treated or euthanased. Prompt veterinary care must be sought if signs of disease arise. 'Downers', i.e. animals who are recumbent and unable to rise and walk, must be promptly treated (and, where necessary, moved with extreme care) or euthanased *in situ*.
- 2.6 Any change of diet, e.g. supplementary feed, should be introduced gradually and animals closely monitored for adverse consequences or disease (e.g. grain poisoning or clostridial disease). Animals should be monitored for 'shy feeders', i.e. those who are reluctant to eat, and, where possible, these should be separated and fed a more palatable feed. Some animals may require more time to adjust to novel feeds.
- 2.7 Where animals are managed more intensively at higher stocking densities, e.g. to assist supplementary feeding, vaccination should be considered for animals at an increased risk of infectious disease (e.g. clostridial diseases, pink eye, respiratory disease and salmonellosis).
- 2.8 Animals must not be allowed to consume potentially unsafe water, feeds or toxic amounts of poisonous plants. Feeding strategies must aim to provide adequate energy and nutrients to support good health and avoid risk of disease in animals.
- 2.9 Appropriate parasite control measures should be in place to minimise loss of condition in animals.
- 2.10 The process of planning and preparing for drought must include strategies that avoid subjecting young animals, pregnant or lactating animals, and older animals to periods of feed and water shortage as they are particularly susceptible. Shortage of feed can result in reduced fertility, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and metabolic disturbances, with starvation and death being the extreme outcome.
- 2.11 If lactating animals are losing excessive body condition, offspring should be weaned and provided with feed supplements appropriate to their age. Early weaned animals must be appropriately managed to reduce stress and minimise risk of disease.
- 2.12 Water sources must be monitored daily. Drying dams and other drying water sources must be managed to avoid animals becoming trapped while attempting to

access them. A responsible person must intervene when an animal has been found to be trapped to ensure a humane outcome and prevent the situation recurring.

- 2.13 Drought-affected animals must not be shorn, dehorned, disbudded, trimmed, tipped or subjected to any other painful or stressful husbandry procedure, to prevent the risk of inflicting further suffering to already weakened animals.
- 2.14 Where animals fit for transport² are sold, every effort should be made to minimise the number of times an animal is transported. Owners should make arrangements to send animals directly to the new buyer (providing the buyer has adequate feed and water provisions for the animals) rather than selling animals via a saleyard or market.
- 2.15 Where animals are transported, records must be kept of the person responsible for the animals at each stage of the journey from point of origin to final destination.
- 2.16 On-farm drought management strategies should also consider the humane management of the many other non-farm animals impacted by drought, including native animals.

3 On-farm planning and preparation

- 3.1 Planning and preparing for drought and extended dry periods is necessary to ensure the welfare of all animals on the property.
- 3.2 A formal, documented drought management plan must be developed and adopted to guide the property through dry periods and droughts. Those with a responsibility for the care of farm animals should familiarise themselves with drought assistance guidance materials available from departments of agriculture and livestock industry bodies. State/territory departments of agriculture may be called upon to assist individual properties to develop their drought management plan.
- 3.3 It is the responsibility of the person in charge to ensure that the drought management plan nominates a support person in the event that they become incapable of enacting their plan.
- 3.4 Planning involves having strategies in place well in advance of animals becoming adversely affected by a shortage of feed and water. These strategies include when and which animals should be sold or agisted (and consequently, will require transport while they are still fit for transport), how long and what to feed animals, whether to continue breeding, when and which animals to euthanase or humanely kill, etc. The aim of these strategies is to manage the welfare of farm animals during drought as well as throughout the recovery period - bearing in mind that both periods may take many years. The drought management plan will need to be progressively re-assessed as the drought continues.
- 3.5 Part of the drought planning and preparation process involves investigating and investing in ways to drought proof the property to maintain a reliable supply of adequate and appropriate feed and water. An awareness of long-term forecast changes in rainfall and temperature at a local/farm level will assist in planning for and managing the risk to feed and water availability during droughts.

² Guidance on whether animals are fit to transport is also provided in 'Is the animal fit to load? A national guide to the pre-transport selection and management of livestock', Meat & Livestock Australia, Sydney, NSW.

4 On-farm drought management strategies

4.1 Selling some or all animals

- 4.1.1 Selling some or all animals (also known as ‘destocking’) during the initial stages of the drought should be the first consideration. Selling those animals who are fit to transport will benefit any remaining animals by providing them with additional feed and water where resources are limited.
- 4.1.2 If only some animals are sold initially, then as the drought progresses consideration will need to be given to the welfare of remaining animals. Gradually selling off animals while they are fit for transport is the best option while ever sufficient feed and water is available for those remaining.

4.2 Feeding of animals destined for sale

- 4.2.1 Animals who are in relatively good condition³ can be sold when market prices are at a premium. In order to achieve market condition in a drought situation, animals may need to be managed more intensively, e.g. by confining animals to smaller paddocks and providing them with supplementary feed.
- 4.2.2 Supplementary-feeding areas must be well drained and provide all animals with shade and protection from the elements. A constant supply of suitable and sufficient drinking water must be available to meet the animals’ daily needs. Sufficient trough space should be provided to allow animals easy access.
- 4.2.3 Care needs to be taken to avoid stress or injury resulting from competition for feed or water and, where it occurs, competition must be addressed.

4.3 Feeding of breeding animals

- 4.3.1 Pregnant and lactating animals are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of drought, and decisions around whether to mate all or part of the breeding herd, or not to mate at all, must be based on whether these animals can be kept in relatively good body condition and a good state of welfare during a drought.
- 4.3.2 Feeding breeding animals (and their offspring) is risky and its feasibility depends not only on market demand for breeding animals at the time of selling but also on the ability to feed the breeding herd and maintain them in good condition throughout the gestation period until weaning and beyond. Breeding animals who can be maintained in good condition throughout the duration of the drought will provide a future source of income when offspring are sold. Where there is any doubt as to the ability to feed and maintain breeding animals (and their offspring) in relatively good body condition throughout a drought, a decision that is in the best interest of the animal must be made as soon as possible and with the knowledge that the length of a drought is unpredictable and can last for many years.

4.4 Survival feeding

- 4.4.1 RSPCA Australia opposes the practice of ‘survival feeding’. Providing animals with only enough food to barely maintain essential body processes will deplete available body fat reserves, considerably weaken the animal and have other serious animal welfare implications including the mental suffering caused by

³ Animals in relatively good condition will have backbones and short ribs that feel smooth and rounded with firm pressure being required to feel under and between the ribs.

extreme hunger. It is unacceptable to allow an animal to become so weak that they cannot stand or walk.

4.4.2 Although survival feeding may seem more profitable than keeping animals in good condition because of lower feeding costs, in the long run, survival feeding is likely to reduce both animal welfare and profitability. This is because animals in good condition will bounce back more rapidly when the drought breaks and receive a premium at market and because survival feeding results in reduced fertility, reduced yield (e.g. wool and discounts for tender wool) and higher death rates.

4.4.3 Where a situation is, or is likely to be, reached where survival feeding is the only option, animals must be sold immediately or humanely killed at the earliest opportunity to prevent (further) suffering. Prolonged drought, ongoing and often increasing feed costs, extreme and prolonged animal suffering, coupled with the real possibility of starvation of the herd makes survival feeding an unacceptable strategy.

4.5 Agistment and use of travelling stock routes

4.5.1 Where drought is limited to a particular region, animals may be moved to areas where feed is sufficient to maintain good body condition. This may include animals being walked along travelling stock routes.

4.5.2 Animals must be fit for transport before being moved be it by road or on foot. Animals not fit for transport and not fit for walking along travelling stock routes include those who are unable to bear weight on all legs; emaciated, dehydrated, injured or distressed; blind in both eyes; and animals with conditions likely to cause further pain or distress during transport or while on route. Where animals are moved on foot, the rate of travel should not exceed the normal walking pace of the slowest animal in the herd. Animals must not be walked to the point of exhaustion of the slowest or weakest animal in the herd.

4.5.3 The agistment paddock(s) or reserves for travelling stock and other facilities should be inspected thoroughly prior to moving any animals. Any loading and unloading ramps should be in working order and fencing secure.

4.5.4 Good quality feed and drinking water should be available in sufficient quantity to meet the animals' daily needs.

4.5.5 Animals should be introduced gradually to green pasture or crops and monitored closely due to the risk of bloat and possible death.

4.5.6 A legally binding, written contract outlining who is the person in charge of the animals while on agistment or using travelling stock routes should ensure ongoing monitoring and prompt treatment of sick or injured animals. Such a contract must also include emergency contact details.

4.6 Management of downers

4.6.1 Animals who are recumbent and unable to rise and walk without assistance or are staggering must not be mistreated in an effort to get them to move. This includes being harassed by dogs, being hit, kicked, punched or dragged, or lifted by the head, ears, horns, neck, wool, skin or by a single leg, being prodded (including with an electric prodder) or shouted at.

4.6.2 The person in charge must ensure that downers are promptly treated or euthanased.

4.7 Euthanasia and humane killing

- 4.7.1 Animals who are unable to stand or walk, are emaciated, injured or diseased and will not recover, must be euthanased by a trained and competent operator. Should a situation be reached or where it is highly likely that animals can no longer be fed and watered and no other management options are available, including transport, these animals must be humanely killed at the earliest opportunity to prevent (further) suffering.
- 4.7.2 A sufficient number of trained and competent persons must be on hand to promptly carry out euthanasia or humane killing should that be required. Each animal must be immediately checked to confirm death, including checking for absence of rhythmic breathing and absence of corneal reflex.
- 4.7.3 RSPCA Australia recognises that drought conditions requiring the euthanasia or humane killing of animals can be very challenging and distressing both mentally and physically for those involved. It is vital that persons tasked with the killing of farm animals ensure their personal wellbeing as well as that of the animals in their care.

5 Transportation of drought-affected farm animals

5.1 Management of downers

- 5.1.1 Animals who are recumbent and unable to rise and walk without assistance or are staggering, must not be loaded, transported or unloaded.
- 5.1.2 The person in charge must ensure that downers are promptly treated or euthanased. Where the transporter is unable to ensure treatment or euthanasia of a downer animal while in transit, the transporter must, upon reaching their destination, ensure unloading of other animals occurs promptly and without distress or injury to the downer animal following which the downer must be attended to immediately.
- 5.1.3 Consigners, owners, agents and/or transporters responsible for loading and transporting unfit animals without veterinary direction must be subject to sanctions and reported to the relevant regulatory authority by the receiver of the animals and/or others within the transport chain of responsibility.

5.2 Transport of drought-affected animals

- 5.2.1 The following provisions apply to the transport of drought-affected animals who are still able to walk and fit to transport but are in poor condition⁴ and where, for various reasons, supplementary feeding is not available. Veterinary advice must be sought where there is any doubt or concern about these animals' ability to cope with the intended journey. Consideration must be given to the purpose for transporting these animals, their ability to withstand the entire journey and the specific conditions under which they are to be transported.
- 5.2.2 Persons in charge should act early and make arrangements to send drought-affected animals directly to their point of destination and should not consign animals to saleyards, where possible. In the case of animals being sent to slaughtering establishments, they should be sent to the nearest available abattoir or knackery.

⁴ Animals in poor condition will have hips, backbones and short ribs that are prominent and sharp to the touch with individual ribs clearly visible.

- 5.2.3 Drought-affected animals must be provided with dry feed and access to water up until the point of loading to allow them to better withstand the stress and rigours associated with transport. Records accompanying drought-affected animals throughout the transport journey must clearly state the last time the animals had access to feed and water. Because of their already weakened state, time off feed and water for drought-affected animals must be kept to an absolute minimum.
- 5.2.4 Loading and unloading of drought-affected animals must be undertaken with extra care. Drought-affected animals may have difficulty negotiating ramps and inclines and should only be transported on the bottom deck of vehicles. They should be provided with bedding or rubber matting and have enough space for all animals to lie down at the same time on their sternum. The unloading of animals at saleyards, markets and slaughtering establishments should be monitored by a competent staff member of the facility. If, at loading or unloading, animals are found to be unfit for transport, they must be promptly treated or euthanased by a trained and competent operator.
- 5.2.5 In-transit inspections must be carried out by the driver at intervals of at least every two hours when drought-affected animals are being transported. In-transit inspections should be recorded by the transporter noting any problems identified and actions taken.
- 5.2.6 Drought-affected farm animals must be protected against exposure to extremes of temperature and weather; for example, during hot days, transport vehicles must not be left stationary unless shade can be provided and only for the shortest possible time to prevent heat stress. Where it is considered necessary to transport animals during periods of extreme heat⁵ (e.g. pending fire danger, urgent agistment, to provide access to shade), they must be loaded, transported and unloaded at night or in the cooler parts of the day. On the transport vehicle, space allowance per animal should be increased on hot days to improve air flow and cooling of animals.

6 Handling drought-affected animals at saleyards and markets

- 6.1 Drought-affected animals should not be consigned to saleyards or markets. Because transport is inherently stressful and drought-affected animals are particularly vulnerable, they should be consigned directly to their point of destination be that a slaughtering establishment⁶ or another property.
- 6.2 Where drought-affected animals are intended to be consigned to saleyards or markets, they must be allowed to put on some condition before transport and then be given time to recover after unloading at a saleyard or market prior to being on-sold for further transport.
- 6.3 Where drought-affected animals are consigned to saleyards or markets, these facilities must be notified in advance of the arrival of animals to ensure that the person in charge of the facility or their nominated representative is present to monitor the unloading process.
- 6.4 Drought-affected animals arriving at saleyards or markets must be handled with extra care and handlers must be trained and competent in low-stress stock handling techniques.

⁵ Extreme heat, as experienced by the animal, refers to periods of hot ambient temperature in which the animal is unable to maintain core body temperature within the normal range resulting in heat stress evidenced by loss of appetite, increased respiration rate, excessive drinking, open mouth breathing (panting), lethargy, and reluctance to move.

⁶ Slaughtering establishments include knackery and abattoir facilities.

- 6.5 If, at unloading, animals are found to be unfit for sale or further transport, they must be promptly euthanased. Facility management must hold consigners, owners, agents and/or transporters accountable for transporting unfit animals without veterinary direction, through sanctions and through reporting to the relevant regulatory authority.
- 6.6 Animals whose condition deteriorates to the point where they are unfit for sale and unfit to transport (e.g. because they are unable to rise and walk without assistance), must be promptly treated or euthanased *in situ* by a trained and competent operator. Euthanased animals must not be moved or disposed of until death is confirmed.
- 6.7 Water must be available at all times to all unloaded animals. Dry feed should be provided to animals not sold or transported out within 6 hours of delivery to the saleyard or market or in line with time off feed regulations, whichever occurs first.

7 Handling drought-affected animals at slaughtering establishments⁷

- 7.1 Slaughtering establishments should be notified in advance of drought-affected animals arriving so that preparations can be made to minimise the time to slaughter.
- 7.2 Drought-affected animals arriving at slaughtering establishments must be handled with extra care and handlers must be trained and competent in low-stress stock-handling techniques.
- 7.3 Animals in very poor condition and exhibiting signs of weakness or animals who have been transported under veterinary direction, must be treated as emergency slaughter animals and euthanased immediately by a trained and competent operator.
- 7.4 Animals who are unfit for slaughter (e.g. because they are unable to rise and walk without assistance, cannot bear weight on all legs, or are emaciated) must be euthanased *in situ* by a trained and competent operator immediately on delivery to the establishment or when found in this condition in the holding facilities. Euthanased animals must not be moved or disposed of until death is confirmed. Facility management must hold consigners, owners, agents and/or transporters accountable for transporting unfit animals without veterinary advice, through sanctions and through reporting to the relevant regulatory authority.
- 7.5 Drought-affected animals must be slaughtered as soon as possible and no later than 12 hours from delivery to the establishment. It is essential that water be available to all animals awaiting slaughter.
- 7.6 Bringing drought-affected animals into a slaughtering establishment must be avoided when there is a confirmed or likely delay in processing.

8 Legal considerations

- 8.1 State and territory animal welfare legislation places certain responsibilities on the person in charge of an animal's care - including during times of drought. Legislation requires that a person

⁷ Slaughtering establishments include knackery and abattoir facilities.

- take steps to mitigate harm or suffering
- provide an animal with proper and sufficient food, water and shelter
- not commit an act of cruelty upon an animal
- not abandon an animal.

- 8.2 The *Standards & Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals* and *Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals* provide basic recommendations for the care of farm animals on farm, during transport, at saleyards and at slaughtering establishments. At the very least, those with a responsibility for the care of farm animals must be aware of and comply with state/territory-based animal welfare legislation as well as the relevant animal welfare *Standards* or *Model Codes*. In the case of drought-affected animals, including downers, this responsibility falls to the transporter if the animal is on a vehicle, whereas if the animal is on farm, prior to loading, it is the owner and, if the animal is at a saleyard, market or slaughtering establishment, the responsibility is with the receiver of the animal.
- 8.3 In certain jurisdictions, animal welfare legislation obliges those with a responsibility for the care of farm animals to implement drought management strategies that ensure animals are provided with appropriate care.
- 8.4 During periods of drought, where there is increased risk to animal welfare, authorised animal welfare inspectors should increase attendance at saleyards, markets and slaughtering establishments to ensure that transporter and facility responsibilities under state and territory animal welfare legislation are being met.
- 8.5 Where persons responsible for managing farm animals do not comply with written directions to honour their legal obligations, consideration should be given to implementing a structured process that engages animal welfare and farm animal management expertise and seeks to improve, monitor and assess animal welfare outcomes but also has the ability to recommend animals be removed and dealt with by the regulatory authority should the responsible person fail to cooperate and animal welfare continue to decline.