

Managing farm animals during drought

(adopted 06/12/10)

1 Introduction

1.1 This position paper must be read in conjunction with the following RSPCA policies:

- Policy B - Farm animals
- Policy F - Transportation of animals
- Policy G - Humane killing

1.2 The frequency of exceptionally hot years, low rainfall and low soil moisture has been increasing in recent decades and this trend is expected to continue across Australia in the years to come. The resulting droughts are not isolated events; they occur over vast areas across the country and have significant and lasting effects on the land, the people whose livelihoods depend on the land and the farm animals in their care.

1.3 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 adequate water supply, managing the environment, and building up financial reserves. This position paper focuses on strategies for managing animals on farm as well as at slaughter.

1.4 Where reference is made to the transport of drought-affected animals, the following position papers apply:

- Position Paper F3 Transportation of drought-affected livestock
- Position Paper F4 Road transport of livestock

2 General principles

2.1 At all times, animals must have access to good quality drinking water, be provided with shade, and be able to shelter from extremes of weather.

2.2 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 or sell must be made sooner rather than later and well before the animal is too weak to be moved.

2.3 Daily monitoring is required to ensure sick or weak animals are quickly identified, treated or humanely killed.

2.4 Any change of diet should be introduced gradually and animals closely monitored for any adverse reactions or reluctance to feed

2.5 Animals should not be allowed to consume toxic amounts of poisonous plants.

See also - [Policy B4.11 Grazing for the control of toxic weeds](#)

2.6 Appropriate parasite control measures should be in place to minimise loss of condition in animals.

- 2.7 If lactating animals are losing excessive body condition, offspring should be weaned and provided with appropriate feed supplements.
- 2.8 Care must be taken to avoid animals becoming trapped in drying dams and other water sources.
- 2.9 Animals that are fit for transport¹ but can no longer be fed and watered should be agisted, sold in the market or to an abattoir before their condition deteriorates.

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 Planning involves having strategies in place well in advance of animal health and welfare becoming adversely affected by a shortage of feed and water.
- 3.3 Young animals, pregnant or lactating animals, and older animals are particularly susceptible to periods of feed shortage. Reduced fertility, vitamin and mineral deficiencies, and metabolic disturbances are the result of a shortage of feed, with starvation and death being the extreme outcome. The planning and preparation process is aimed at avoiding such outcomes.

4 On-farm drought management strategies

- 4.1 RSPCA Australia strongly encourages management strategies that aim to reduce the risk to animal welfare.
- 4.2 A number of options are available to manage the welfare of farm animals during the drought as well as throughout the recovery period - bearing in mind that both periods may take many years. These options are outlined below and can be used alone or in combination to provide for the welfare of the animals.
- 4.3 **Selling some or all of the animals**
 - 4.3.1 Selling all or some animals during the initial stages of the drought should be the first consideration. Selling those animals that are fit to transport will benefit any remaining animals by providing them with additional feed and water where resources are limited.
 - 4.3.2 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 other animals, in the interest of those sold and those remaining, is the best option
- 4.4 **Feeding of animals destined for sale**
 - 4.4.1 Animals that are in relatively good condition² 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 supplementary feeding them for the duration of the confinement.

¹ Where animals are required to be fit to transport, guidance is also provided in 'Is it fit to load? A national guide to the selection of animals fit to transport', Meat & Livestock Australia, Sydney, NSW.

² 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.

- 4.4.2 When supplementary feeding animals, novel feeds must be introduced slowly to avoid illness or other negative consequences. Some animals may require more time to adjust to novel feeds.
- 4.4.3 Confined 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 from adequate trough space must be available to meet the animals' daily needs.
- 4.4.4 Care needs to be taken to avoid stress or injury resulting from competition for feed or water.
- 4.5 Feeding of animals destined for breeding**
- 4.5.1 Breeding animals that can be maintained in good condition throughout the duration of the drought will provide a future source of income when offspring are sold.
- 4.5.2 This strategy is risky and depends not only on market demand 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 if breeding animals are not sold.
- 4.5.3 The strategy will need to be re-assessed as the drought progresses. Pregnant and lactating animals are particularly vulnerable, and decisions around whether to mate all or part of the breeding herd, or not to mate at all, have implications for their ongoing welfare.
- 4.6 Maintenance feeding**
- 4.6.1 RSPCA Australia does not support maintenance feeding of animals in poor condition. Providing animals with only enough food to maintain essential body processes will deplete available body fat reserves, considerably weaken the animal and have other serious animal welfare implications. It is unacceptable to allow an animal to become so weak that it cannot stand or walk.
- 4.6.2 Although maintenance feeding may seem more profitable than keeping animals in good condition because of lower feeding costs, in the long run, maintenance feeding is likely to reduce both animal welfare and profitability. This is because animals in good condition will receive a premium at market and because maintenance feeding results in reduced fertility, reduced yield (e.g. wool and discounts for tender wool) and higher death rates.
- 4.6.3 Where a situation has been reached in which maintenance feeding is the only option, animals should be sold immediately. Prolonged drought, ongoing and often increasing feed costs, coupled with the real possibility of starvation of the herd makes maintenance feeding a high-risk strategy.
- 4.7 Agistment and use of travelling stock routes**
- 4.7.1 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 being walked along travelling stock routes.
- 4.7.2 Animals must be fit for transport before being moved be it by road or on foot. Where animals are moved on foot, the rate of travel should not exceed the normal walking pace of the slowest animal in the herd.

- 4.7.3 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.
- 4.7.4 Good quality feed and drinking water should be available in sufficient quantity to meet the animal's daily needs.
- 4.7.5 Animals should be introduced gradually to green pasture or crops, and monitored closely due to the risk of bloat and possible death.
- 4.7.6 A legally binding, written contract outlining who is responsible for the welfare of the animals while on agistment or using travelling stock routes will ensure ongoing monitoring and prompt treatment of sick or injured animals. Such a contract must also include emergency contact details.
- 4.8 Buying and selling animals**
- 4.8.1 Selling animals that are more expensive to feed and buying in animals that are less so, is a strategy available to those who are less concerned with the loss of herd genetics built up over many years of breeding.
- 4.8.2 The strategy will need to be re-assessed as the drought progresses to ensure that sufficient feed is available to maintain all animals in good condition.
- 4.8.3 Animals bought in or sold should be fit for transport.
- 4.9 Humane killing**
- 4.9.1 Animals that are unfit for transport either because they are unable to stand, walk, are emaciated, injured or diseased, and that can no longer be fed or watered should be humanely killed on farm by a trained and competent operator.

See also - [Policy B5 Euthanasia of farm animals](#)
[Policy G1 Humane killing](#)

5 Handling drought-affected animals at slaughtering establishments³

- 5.1 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.
- 5.2 Slaughtering establishments should be notified in advance of drought-affected animals arriving so that preparations can be made to minimise the time to slaughter.
- 5.3 Animals that are in very poor condition and exhibiting signs of weakness should be treated as emergency slaughter animals and slaughtered immediately by a trained and competent operator.
- 5.4 Animals that are unable to rise and walk without assistance should be humanely killed by a trained and competent operator immediately on delivery to the establishment or when found in this condition in the holding facilities. Such animals must be killed in situ and not be moved until dead or unconscious.

³ Slaughtering establishments include rendering, knackery and abattoir facilities.

- 5.5 All drought-affected animals should be slaughtered within 12 hours of delivery. It is essential that water be available to all animals and feed be provided to animals not slaughtered within the establishment's required time off water/feed period.
- 5.6 Bringing drought-affected animals into a slaughtering establishment should be avoided when the duration of an ongoing or likely industrial dispute or other delay in processing is unknown.

6 Legal considerations

- 6.1 State and territory animal welfare legislation places certain responsibilities on those in charge of an animal's wellbeing - including during times of drought. Legislation requires that a person
- not commit an act of cruelty upon an animal
 - provides an animal with proper and sufficient food, water and shelter
 - not abandon an animal.
- 6.2 The Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals and Standards & Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals provide basic recommendations for the care of farm animals. In general, compliance with the relevant Model Code (or animal welfare Standard) will ensure compliance with animal welfare legislation.