

Adjusting livestock numbers as a precautionary measure at the onset of a possible drought and beyond

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When the summer rainfall grassland areas of South Africa experience below average grazing conditions towards the end of March, there is a more than 50:50 possibility that livestock farmers will experience grazing shortages until the onset of the next rainy season.

There are several alternatives of bridging a grazing shortfall during the winter. One of them is to reduce livestock numbers timeously. This article provide a best practice guideline to achieve the best possible results. Removal from the veld and farm should be done in the following order:

- i Wean all lambs and calves early, remove them to a feed lot (excluding replacement animals) and sell them.
- ii Market non-reproducing animals, i.e. wethers and oxen. Do not wait too long as they will lose condition and prices may drop as more and more producers get rid of access stock.
- iii Identify female animals with a tendency to either skip pregnancy or are poor mothers. Sell them off gradually as conditions deteriorate, starting with the cattle as they are the most expensive to feed during a drought.
- iv If the summer rains stay away and the poor grazing conditions are protracted, “mouth” all the female animals left on the farm. Identify the older animals up to full mouth and start selling the “slyt” animals first and later the full mouths if necessary.

The rest of the female animals on the farm constitute the nucleus breeding herd and should not be sold. Rather feed them as cost effectively as possible. If the off-loading process was started timeously it would probably only be necessary to provide the nucleus herd with a good lick. Keep in mind that a lick is only effective when sufficient amounts of roughage is still available, albeit of poor quality.

- v If the drought conditions persist far into the next growing season and grazing conditions become under serious strain, one can consider to sell replacement animals. But, this must only be considered in real disaster conditions.
- vi Finally, never consider not mating your ewes and cows. This is one of those risks every livestock producer must take. One can always make a plan with lambs and calves if it does not rain, but you cannot make a plan without lambs and calves when it does rain.