



DROUGHTS AND LIVESTOCK (Approved 19 Feb 2016)

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Droughts are a seasonal occurrence in our Region and are predicted to become more intense in Southern Africa. The years when droughts are likely to occur are not really predictable far in advance. Livestock farmers should factor into their management plan in advance appropriate action/s they plan to institute in the event of a drought. Livestock farmers remain accountable for the welfare of their animals at all times and the animals should not bear the brunt of poor planning. It is totally unacceptable for livestock to starve to death which is cruel, slow, and totally avoidable.

There are three options that can be taken when faced with a prolonged drought: to feed, to sell or to slaughter . The time to act is immediately when confronted with the realisation that things are not going to improve in the short term. Starvation (doing nothing) must be avoided at all costs .

- Allowing animals to starve is both financially disastrous with no return at all for livestock that die, and morally unacceptable.
- Money obtained from livestock sales can be used to buy feed for the remaining animals and eventually to buy livestock when the drought ends.
- Reducing livestock numbers has the advantage that less but more effective supplements for remaining livestock can be made available.
- Delaying the culling of an animal deprived of food may also render the meat from such an animal unsuitable for human consumption.

- Stocking drought-stricken farms with a full complement of hungry animals will force them to graze very aggressively, which can ruin pastures and veld for years before they can recover.
- Overstocking these farms increases the likelihood of plant poisoning in desperate, hungry livestock.
- Starved animals will not grow or reproduce adequately and their offspring are likely to be permanently stunted and unproductive.
- Undernourished livestock are far more susceptible to a range of diseases and parasites.
- Economic recovery after the drought ends will be slow and expensive.
- Last but not least, it is ethically not acceptable simply to allow animals to starve to death slowly.

Farmers have to implement their contingency plans in stages as the drought becomes more critical.

- Sell older animals that will struggle during a drought and may not make it through the winter in a poorer condition
- wean calves, lambs or kids as far as possible even if lighter than normal and assist small weanlings that are not immediately marketable
- keep core livestock that will be needed to rebuild the herd later and remove all non-breeding livestock, and stores from the grazing .

When the condition of livestock has deteriorated to the point that they are not marketable, it is preferable to kill them humanely rather than to allow them to die a lingering and pointless death.

Because droughts of varying degrees are inevitable, it is advisable that farmers accumulate a reserve of at least 6 months feed in the form of hay, silage, foggage or conserved grazing.

The end of a drought does not mean the end of its consequences. What follows is often termed a “green drought”, where pastures become green but are scanty and fragile. The pastures have to be given enough time to recover before they can be used again.