



PREPARE *for* DROUGHT

plan it out

Different strategies
to tackle dry times



Farming through drought years is hard and so is knowing what to do, and when to do it.

During the most recent drought, our Gippsland farmers used strategies and gained experience they will put into place during the next dry. These eight case studies provide insight into their experiences.

**They have a plan
for next time, and
YOU CAN TOO!**



Partnerships and Strategies

Droughts are difficult for farmers, rural suppliers and their friends and families. Everyone is impacted in some way, and we all want to help each other wherever we can.

A partnership between our local farmers and groups, has seen the collection of stories of how different farmers used different drought strategies.

Our farmers have shared their lessons from feeding out to growing crops and burying feed, right through to de-stocking.

While we know the strategies won't suit everyone, as each farmer has different enterprises, soil types and equipment, there will be ideas to take on board to help better manage the next drought.

Scan the QR codes in this publication to watch our farmers talk about how they survived the drought.



Chris Nixon

"The hardest part is backing your decisions because watching B-Doubles take your cows away is not easy."



Strategies

The Nixon's main strategy was to destock due to experience over the 2002 drought, when they fed stock and ran up an 'enormous' feed bill. Chris 'vowed and declared to never do this again'.

In 2018 the trigger point was: drought for 6 months and no paddock feed in April; a poor outlook forecast by the Bureau of Meteorology and no sign of the traditional autumn break.

They retained half their core beef breeders and 400 of 500 dairy cows. Advantages included protected pastures and less stress in the household.

They grew feed each year, sowing annual winter and summer crops on swampy peat country, which was cut for hay and silage.

They constructed a feed pad for dairy cattle to save wasted feed, estimate a 25% saving, and accessed on-farm water infrastructure grants to put down bores.

While it took four years to rebuild numbers without buying cattle in, high stock prices were avoided.

Even with current high cattle prices Chris does not believe there is a business case around buying in feed.



Farm details

Chris and his wife Helen run dairy and beef cattle at Orbost, Cann River and a family farm in Black Mountain.

Beef: 800 breeders at Orbost and Cann River when fully stocked (plus 250 heifer calves), split calving – 300 autumn/500 spring.

Dairy: 500 head – spring calving.

Total: 2000 breeders over three properties.

Pasture feed base, supplemented by silage.

There are 4 silage pits on the farm and another 4 on the dairy. One pit on the dairy will last 8 months.

On the beef country, destocking paddocks and protecting pasture crown meant all pastures recovered following a return to average rainfall.

That meant minimum over sowing/ replanting, a large financial saving.

"We don't waste any surplus feed – we make any surplus grass into silage."

Scott Langley

“I’m not excited about the next dry but I’m ready for it.”

Strategies

Scott set hard decision rules, or triggers, and stuck by them – e.g. rain by a given date, if not – sell stock.

He learnt to grow fodder beet over 20 ha and found 8 ha of fodder beet fed 500 dried off cows for 10 weeks, via direct grazing.

He secured a drought loan from Regional Investment Corporation, used sheep containment areas with automated feeding systems, destocked one property and shifted to annual dryland cropping to protect soils and grow some feed, moving stock on and off to graze crops.

He invested in fencing, feeding, fodder storage and irrigation infrastructure.

“I continually bought and sold cattle, added weight then sold to maintain a cash flow to service debt. I took on agisted dairy cattle, raised dairy-cross bull calves, grew feed (annual crops, dryland and irrigated) and bought in some feed.”

Farm details

Rosedale, 200 ha, sheep; Glengarry 800 ha, including 120 ha irrigation, breeding/trading beef cattle (250 breeders). Aiming for 1000 head self-replacing Merino flock.

Scott bought land in 2018–19 and debt meant he couldn’t destock and wait it out, so he kept moving.

Scott takes on dairy agistment, backgrounds others’ cattle, and his goal is to have enough fodder reserves for at least 12 months.

A drought loan was used to grow maize from one pivot, and also to bury silage (500 tonnes of dry matter) that will last 12 months.

“Next time I would pull the levers sooner – I would bring the sheep in off the paddocks sooner.”



Dave Caldwell

“The day I thought about change was always too late - my main lesson is to react more quickly next time.”



Strategies

Dave's strategies included early weaning at four months, earlier pregnancy testing, hard/early culling of older and/or failed-to-join cows and moving from split to spring calving, selling the autumn calvers, or 20% of the herd.

They contained the sheep and also bought a new double disc seeder to establish annual crops for feed and to restore ground cover.

They kept actively sowing crops/growing some feed even on little rainfall, kept soil covered and found it cost effective.

“We took advantage of the drought assistance grants, fixing up livestock water supplies and buying stock feeders.”

“By May 2019, we started growing fodder using irrigation, meaning we could buy cattle with better genetics and also bounce back quickly post-drought.”

A new automated stock bore was equipped in February 2019 which pumps into a new trough system to the entire farm.

Dave believes farmers can always be more prepared and having a solid plan for the next drought does not cost anything.



Farm details

Dave and Ellie Caldwell, 'Coonmoor', Red Gum Plains, Lindenow South, 1400 ha.

Runs 700 breeders – aiming to increase to 800–850 within two years. Beef to sheep ratio is 80:20.

First generation farmer in a fourth-generation family business established in 1894.

Aims to have the average age of cows down to 6.5 years.

Deliberate investments over drought included irrigation development with a 550 ML water right, \$1m in infrastructure (centre pivot: 3 x pivot sites, 150 ML turkey nest dam).

Invested in pasture improvement by more resowing and annual winter cropping for fodder (300–400 ha/yr) plus summer crops (80 ha).

Produce 1800–2500 tonne silage/yr. Some shared with family dairy operation.

“Take more holidays to remove yourself mentally and physically from the farm. Take a long weekend every few months, I was feeding stock before I was feeding myself at times.”



Trent Anderson

“The drought taught me to make the space and keep renovating pastures, short term pain brings long term gain, do this work to make the farm more productive and it pays back 10-fold.”

Strategies

Trent and his wife Nicole bought in large amounts of hay April/May 2018, weaned calves early and grazed failing wheat crops.

They harvested barley and canola for cash flow in 2018 and sowed a small area of summer crop for feed.

“We agisted the majority of the cattle herd, destocking to 50% through agisting/selling and only carrying capacity.”

“We couldn’t grow grass, but we could grow crops, so we kept doing this and found the stubble paddocks didn’t blow like the rest did. We learnt what we can do and what we can grow; sowing annuals with very little rain.”

Trent found uncontained sheep stayed in better condition, with the same ration.

“Next time we will use containment in small bursts but never longer than 8 weeks.”

He learnt containing sheep for 4–5 months was no good. He will also keep rotating stock regularly around better perennial pasture paddocks. He believes the development of the largest, most efficient fodder storage system you can afford will pay off.

Following the 2021 season there are 600 large square bales of silage buried as a drought reserve. “We aim to increase this reserve 5-fold to cover 18 months to 2 years feed requirements.”

Farm details

Giffard, 2040 ha and 300 ha contract cropping.

Mixed farming –cereal and oil seed winter crops integrated with livestock –5000 Merino ewes and 500 breeders.

Cropping 1000 ha/year. Multi-generational business.

An active pasture development program had 70% completed pre-drought.

Shifted pastures from mainly perennial rye to a mix of fescues, cocksfoot and phalaris. Aim to oversow or resow 100 ha/year.

Recently started cover cropping to grow more feed and also trialling the use of maize to use stored moisture over summer.

Introduced mixes of species (turnips, millets, sunflowers) that fed livestock through to the autumn break in 2021.

“To others I’d say: ‘Get some cheap sowing equipment and try to grow more feed’. That’s the answer.”



Trevor Caithness

“Capital that’s tied up in fodder is a good investment - better than bank interest.”



Strategies

Trevor recognised winter failing in 2017 and began sourcing fodder, despite having good supplies on-farm from the 2016 season, using their own transport and undercover storage.

They weaned calves early at four months of age, sold old, under-performing stock and contained cattle onto stubble paddocks.

Watering, feeding and silage infrastructure was upgraded, including a large concrete silage pit, as silage makes an important drought reserve strategy.

“For fibre, we cut our own straw and we found cattle preferred barley straw.”

“Our catchment dams failed by mid 2018 so we set up a reticulated system to troughs, the water source was from S&D bores.”

They utilised drought assistance grants to improve the water infrastructure, and also completed upgrades on feeding troughs and built a concrete silage bunker.

They started containment early, switching to grazing/holding in stubble paddocks to preserve the perennial pasture base and groundcover.

Also focussed on growing crops for silage so fodder could be put away in case the drought persisted.



Farm details

Trevor and Carryn Caithness, ‘Kintore’, Goon Nure, 1330 ha, 600–700 beef composite breeders; fodder crops for cash and on-farm feed over 380 ha/year.

The business has expanded and is currently in a consolidation phase.

Stock are fattened for the Coles grass-fed label. Keeping the breeding herd as young as possible is an ongoing aim.

They have concentrated on building a solid pasture base and worked towards saving that by containing cattle on stubble.

They took a more deliberate focus on growing fodder, maintaining their breeding herd with bought-in hay and their own silage, growing fodder crops like millet and sorghum.

“The complementary benefits of running a cropping and beef business were demonstrated during the drought. We were able to move stock off pastures onto stubble and grow fodder so we could feed them rather than sell them.”

Vanessa Ingram Daniel

“The best thing we bought was a disc seeder so we’re not damaging the soil.”

Strategies

In October 2019, Vanessa and Chris sold almost a quarter of their herd, which were pregnant breeders, at the time a very hard decision.

They also sold young stock locally but demand for the F1-cross wasn't strong. As a result, they have since improved their bloodlines to ensure stock can always be sold to feedlots.

“We weaned early and supplementary fed to lighten the load on paddocks, choosing paddocks that needed renovating to use as sacrifice paddocks to feed stock.”

Most paddocks are four to five hectares and three were used for stock containment.

They gained a grant for a bore to feed the existing trough system. The farm previously ran on dam and town water, but the dams dried up and town water was expensive.

“Our plains country is feast and famine and the season cuts out in February/March.”

They invested in a silo and three lightweight feeders on skids that can be easily towed around. These are also used at weaning time

Farm details

Vanessa Ingram Daniel and her husband Chris Daniel farm in partnership on the Marlo Plains, between Marlo and Cape Conran.

Their 200 Angus breeders run on 700 acres, which includes leased land.

The herd is split calving, using Wagyu genetics in an AI program and back-up bulls.

The F1 Wagyu calves are sold to feedlots.

We put in annuals to make hay and silage and currently have 500 bales of hay and 500 bales of silage

Post-drought they try to keep ground cover intact and have planted multi-species crops to have feed in the February/March feed gap as well as building the soil profile.

They have invested in tractors and machinery to aid with sowing crops.

“We learnt to plant annuals to take advantage of any moisture we got.”

Simon and Sonya Lawlor

“A tractor is our key to success in drought, without that there are very limited options.”



Strategies

The Lawlors have learned nothing is the same for each drought, and distinctly remember the 1997 drought, when they were ‘young, exposed and inexperienced’.

“Back then we couldn’t move on the scale we needed to. We got better at forward planning and recognising the seasons,” Simon said.

“We wanted to simplify our whole operation, so we scaled back the split calving herd to autumn calving. We sold about 40 older spring-calving cows with calves at foot in the drought and that hurt.”

The Lawlors firmly believe seed needs to be in the ground to make the most of moisture opportunities.

They have invested in two relatively new tractors and machinery to grow deep-rooted perennials. They don’t need to wait for a contractor and can concentrate on producing feed for the winter and summer feed gaps.

They also grow more annual feed, having invested in increasing their paddocks’ fertility.

Last drought, Sonya recalls sowing seed in dusty, hot, and windy conditions and asking Simon “Why bother?”

“Simon told me ‘If it’s in the ground there’s a chance it will grow. It won’t grow in the shed.’ And then we had a thunderstorm, it grew, and that despair turned to elation.”

Farm details

Simon and Sonya Lawlor farm in partnership in the Livingstone Valley, near Omeo in the High Country.

They have 1700 hectares, and are fortunate to have land alongside Livingstone Creek, plus 200 ha of bush, with access to mountain grazing leases in the summer.

They have 400 Hereford breeders, which begin calving on 1 April. They decreased their sheep numbers from 1500 ewes to 600 first-cross ewes.

They sell 200–250 Hereford steers and heifers at the Mountain Calf Sales in March each year.

“Drought is always on your mind,” Simon said. “If you’re not in one, you’re either coming out of one or getting ready to go into another one.”

*“Never stop learning.
Read the signs early and be
pro-active, not reactive.”*



Bruce, Kate, Alastair and Dee Commins

“We learned it pays to keep condition on your cows – if they have enough condition they can last through extended dry conditions.”

Strategies

The Commins family did not destock but instead kept condition on their cows by weaning calves at 6 months of age.

As the drought persisted, they weaned some even earlier, feeding them pellets.

To help maintain groundcover, they sold weaners younger and lighter than usual (the steers at 220–330 kg instead of 450 kg), as well as selling lesser quality heifers at lighter weights.

They bought in and fed canola/cereal hay and separated cattle groups, running cows on rougher country than the steers and joined heifers. This also facilitated stock management and selling decisions.

They bought improved fodder management and feeding equipment, and also cleaned out and enlarged catchment dams.

Bruce believes spring calving afforded them a large advantage in dry conditions, assisting the ability to increase pasture utilisation and retain stocking rates.

Farm details

The Commins family, Bruce, Kate, son Alastair, and daughter Dee, run 1200 Angus breeders.

The cattle are spread over three locations including ‘Gap Creek’ at Tongio, north of Swifts Creek, Hinnomunjie in the Benambra valley, and ‘Meringo’ in the High Country, east of Benambra.

Steers are sold at feedlot weights (450 kg) and the herd is 100% spring calving.

The pasture base is largely unimproved but Alastair has developed a pasture program starting with cereal crops for grazing, with perennials planted in year 3.

Supplementary feed is bought in as needed as there is no hay or silage production. The system sustains the stocking rate most years.

“For us, spring calving is key to maximising feed utilisation and reducing the need for supplementary feeding.”

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