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DoloZest® News

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Late spring and dry summer grazing strategies

I've tended to bat away comments from folk about a pending dry summer. When we started sharemilking back in the 1970's well-known locals every year predicted a summer 'drought' based on the early flowering of trees in the district.

Once every six- or seven-years brown was the dominant colour of pastures for a period over summer and those folk were keen to let everyone know their predictions were right.

Just as there is nearly always a period during winter when ground becomes excessively wet and cold, there is a period in summer when it's too hot and dry for strong pasture growth.

We are not into predictions, however there are regions where groundwater levels are still lower than normal for this time of the year, there's been less than usual winter rain fall, and little significant rain is forecast for September. Although that could soon change, it's worth keeping in mind strategies for navigating summer should the present pattern continue.

There will be a time in spring, typically around the 20th September when pasture growth exceeds demand and a rapid build-up in pasture cover occurs. When that arrives there are options. Best practise is to graze pastures at the optimum height, which occurs when they reach the point where growth just starts to slow, and regular observation will answer the question of when that is.

This means that paddocks or areas have to be skipped in order to maintain the ideal grazing level, and those paddocks become the areas of genuine surplus.

The decision is when, or if, they are harvested, or left standing to be grazed at a later date. Should the season still look to be drier than normal earlier rather than later harvesting will ensure stronger regrowth.

In the warmer regions early November is when seed head development becomes apparent and harvesting before a 10% seed emergence has occurred will ensure highly digestible and nutritious supplement is available over summer, should it be required.

A client in one of the drier regions last summer decided to lengthen his grazing intervals earlier than usual, make less supplement, and carry more feed ahead.

It paid dividends allowing stock to be fully fed longer into summer. Quality was seen as a little compromised however animals gained weight and entered winter, at, or close to target weights.

A thirty-day interval by the end of December means each paddock is grazed no more than three times before the end of March by which time autumn rain is likely to have arrived.

The alternative option is to continuously reduce the intervals between grazing, resulting in ever declining covers with pastures having little ability to respond to summer rain. Often called 'chasing your tail' ultimately leading to hungry animals picking away at pastures with little available feed.

Dry matter content of summer pasture

The actual DM of summer pasture can be twice that of rapidly growing spring pasture, which means that it's easy to underestimate the amount of pasture available, particularly in early summer. Where the DM content of summer pasture reaches 35–40% animals require only half the volume of rapidly growing spring pasture of 17% DM.

Prolonged dry summers are tough, on both farming families and animals, however they are easier to cope with when plans are laid in advance. Hopefully, there will be a change in weather patterns and the summer dry will be of normal short duration and easily managed.

The value of hay

Just as in all things there are trends, often but not always with sound underlying reasons.

School summer holidays were scheduled so that children were home and available to help with summer hay making.

Little silage was made as the only machinery available was unable to cut pasture into lengths short enough to be easily forked. Forking long pasture in stacks and pits was arduous work as was the cutting and forking required at feeding out time.

Hay making although demanding was a far more pleasant activity and an extra shed full of hay was seen as insurance against adverse weather.

With bigger tractors and better machinery, the manual labour content has largely gone from silage making, and balage/silage is regarded as quality feed suitable for lactating animals. Hay was dismissed with the aid of the throwaway line that, cows don't milk on hay, and the true value of hay and when best to feed has largely been lost.

Where stocking rates are high and there is a focus on utilising as much pasture as possible through animals there is often not a genuine summer surplus for hay making, however there are blocks of land in all districts that are available for the making of high quality hay.

It is the perfect complement for rapidly growing spring pasture providing essential energy, and the long fibre required for optimum rumen function. It also contains seed and when fed out strategically it reduces the requirement for re-seeding.

Regenerative Ag.

There's a regenerative agricultural movement currently garnering plenty of exposure which we encourage all those interested to find out more about. It's the underlying principles rather than the actual practises that we believe have most merit. To have an informed debate it's essential that there is a definition of regenerative, and in our view any pastoral farming activity that is continuously sequestering carbon in a biologically active soil is regenerative.

Therefore the bulk of sheep and beef operations in this country are regenerative based on soil

carbon measures gathered by researchers over the last thirty years.

Where there is an issue is with intensive dairy and irrigated pasture. The work undertaken by Paul Mudge and his team at Landcare Research lead to a fascinating discussion in which it was stated that, "all irrigated land in this country, without exception, is losing carbon."

Adding water to land doesn't cause carbon to be lost, and just because it is common doesn't make it normal. Further research we think will show that the addition of excess nitrogen is at the heart of this issue.

We've added to our website the article **Regenerative agriculture for food and climate** by Rattan Lal, a distinguished University Professor of soil science and director of the Carbon Management and Sequestration at Ohio State University. In it he argues that RA is a soil-centric rather than seed-centric process and should be viewed in the context that the health of soil, plants, animals, people, *and environment* is one and indivisible.

In the era of COVID 19 this is seen as pertinent and the article draws from concepts and work dating back as far as 1921. It specifically mentions the requirement of the major elements of phosphorus and sulphur for sustainable long-term performance with minimal dependence on agrochemicals.

The article contains the following, "an appropriate question is not whether RA works or not, but how to make it work under site specific conditions...." There's plenty there to ruminate on, and with over twenty years of experience and 18 years of measures, Functional Farming Systems nutrient programmes based on CalciZest and DoloZest are the most comprehensive available.

The following has been included as it highlights the likely outcome of increased regulation in the farming sector.

Government's view of the world could be summed up in a few short phrases.

If it moves, tax it, if it keeps moving regulate it, and if it stops moving subsidize it.

Ronald Reagan

Best Regards, and stay safe.

