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## RAMBLING AROUND THE FARM - DROUGHT

By Andy Cowan

Well, I am still dreaming of rain. More of a nightmare really. Those who remember the drought in the early 1940's – not many of us I guess – talk of the wind and the associated dust storms as being the most memorable aspect of the drought. The media has been showing dust storms over western Victoria on the news recently. This is a worrying sign as the two driest months in my area are March and February respectively. Prior to 2006, the average rainfall in my area was about 1000mm per annum. Last year we received 424mm which dropped the average to 970mm since I have been taking records. Unfortunately, we only had 50mm of rain in the last three months of the year – our main pasture growth period. Since then, the government has stopped all irrigation from the river on which we farm. A big problem – but it is merely representative of the conditions of the rest of the south-east of Australia.

I still have enough water for my stock to drink even though 80% of my dams have dried up. The biggest problem I face in the next 6 months is being able to feed the animals I still have on the farm, having already sold a large percentage of my herd. I have three options. First, to pay the exorbitant prices for feed and maintain the stocking numbers I have at present. Secondly, I could de-stock the farm completely. Thirdly, I can further reduce the number of stock I have, so that I'm only feeding the "elite" core stock of my herd.

The first option is simply not feasible from a financial point of view. Assume that a slaughter animal is worth about \$150. To grow this animal, I am actually feeding two animals. For argument's sake, I am assuming a 120kg hind plus a calf eat the equivalent dry matter or 1.5 mature hinds (6 DSE throughout the year). If the animals are to grow adequately and the hinds are to maintain condition good enough to conceive, together they will need to eat nearly 4kg DM each day. Assume that their diet is composed of 14% protein and about 10 MJME per kg of dry matter. The cost and quality of hay in the current drought varies dramatically. Given the exiting prices for hay and many supplementary feeds (this includes transport), a price of \$400/tonne for feed of this quality is not too unrealistic.

I am also assuming that, given the existing drought conditions, your farm has no grass to speak of. You may like to play around with figures of your own but I have seen farmers in my area buying 2 year old weathered pasture hay for \$130 /4' round bale – basically roughage.

The above figures mean that a red deer breeding unit will be costing about \$1.60 per day to feed. If the calf is to be sold at 300 days of age, it has cost \$480 to produce. Not good if you are only going to sell it for \$150!!

The second option, to de-stock the farm completely, involves emotional, as well as financial, consideration. To de-stock completely can involve two options – agistment or slaughter. Agistment of deer is difficult because of the fencing and yarding requirements. If you are in trouble with feed, it is more than likely that everyone else in your area is in the same situation. To slaughter a whole herd would be a real gut-wrenching experience as years of breeding would be lost. The stock would probably be sold when they are in poor condition as the decision would have been put off until all hope has gone or all resources available have been used up. If the farmer wishes to continue farming deer, the cost of re-stocking a year or two later would need to be taken into account.

As with the 2—1/02 drought, it has been extraordinarily difficult to acquire abattoir space to slaughter animals. This frustration is significant on many levels. It affects the farmer, the venison vendor and the industry as a whole.

The farmer is annoyed that he cannot sell his stock. In my case, I have had to feed 200 head for 4 months while waiting for abattoir space. The stock have lost condition (maybe one tonne of venison in total) and it

has cost me a small fortune just to keep them alive. So the farmer loses income on two levels, by reduce income from the HCW schedules and by feeding them until they can be slaughtered.

The vendors suffer because they have lost their source of income (no sales) and eventually the loss of quality of their product. More than likely, the vendor has been establishing markets over many years, supplying certain cuts and volumes at a certain time. They can not slaughter stock because they are not "allowed" into the abattoirs – there are so many other stock being slaughtered because of the drought.

Thirdly, the whole industry is affected because of the inability and/or uncertainty of being able to sell stock when they are ready. Existing members leave the industry because they are annoyed that they have the stock to sell but cannot. Any potential farmers interested in farming deer for venison would be hesitant in outlaying a lot of money, knowing that selling their product may be difficult.

Many people, for many years, have been saying that the slaughtering of deer is the weakest link in the "paddock to plate" production chain in the venison industry. Times like these certainly reinforce this idea.

The third option is the one that interests me – keeping only the stock that are of real value to me. In my situation, this means keeping any stock with sika blood in it. I will be selling all my red deer hinds and only keeping the sika animals and velvet stags. This will leave me with about 350 head (includes 100 weaners) which, given a decent autumn break, should be manageable. As many of my breeding hinds are 7 or 8 years old, this is probably a wise thing to do anyway. A red deer venison operation in a winter rainfall area may not be the best way forward for me. Velvet production, on the other hand, with grass growing when it is needed is an enterprise that fits the natural cycle of pasture growth in my situation.

Reference:

Chris Tuckwell. The Deer Farming Handbook. June 2003. RIRDC Publicaton No. 03/09