

Drought and climate adaptation program

GrazingFutures Project Case Study

What we know for the next drought

Background

Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) staff working in the GrazingFutures and Leading Sheep projects have been collecting drought learnings from producers since the middle of 2019. In this case study, we focus on data collected from three Leading Sheep regions across Queensland:

- North and Central West
- South West
- South

Graziers in each of these regions were invited to share their essential learnings from the drought. Noel O'Dempsey, Leading Sheep coordinator for the South region, lead the responses by listing what he believes are the most valuable learnings from the drought:

- Be flexible.
- Know you will never get it all right, all the time.
- Drought feeding chews up a lot of time and money.

These drought learnings have been collated to provide a resource for producers when preparing for and managing drought conditions. As at 1 May 2020, 65% of Queensland remains drought declared (Figure 1), and drought conditions have persisted for several years.



Drought and climate adaptation program

QUEENSLAND DROUGHT SITUATION

as reviewed on 1 May 2020

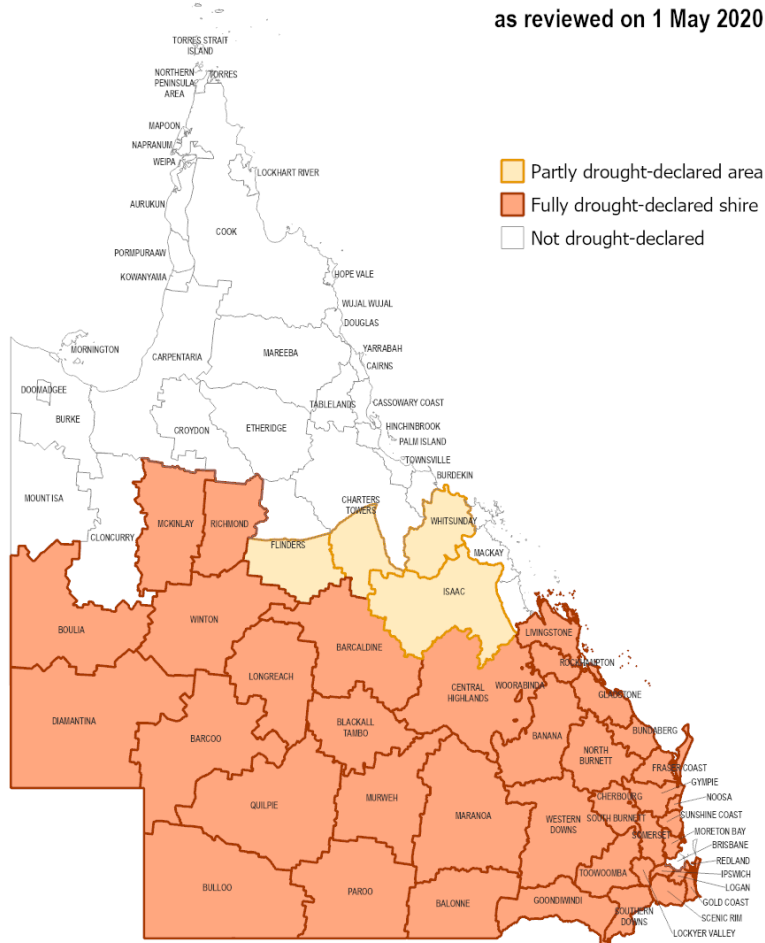


Figure 1: Drought Situation in Queensland as at 1 May, 2020. Source: <https://www.longpaddock.qld.gov.au/drought>

In Australia's highly variable climate, future droughts are inevitable and learning from the past will prove valuable in maintaining productivity in the future. Whilst productivity of land and resources was a key theme in these drought-learning discussions, of equal significance was the importance of each person looking after their emotional wellbeing as well as that of their families.

GrazingFutures supports the resilience of grazing businesses by assisting graziers to recover from the current drought and by educating them to be better equipped to prepare their business and manage future drought conditions. The western Queensland grazing industry contributes significantly to regional economies, so when the industry is profitable regional communities generally perform well. In short, resilient grazing businesses contribute to resilient communities.

The GrazingFutures team recognises the value landholders put on their natural resources. Through best practice extension the project team supports these businesses to identify where they can best improve. The team works with producers to grow their knowledge and skills through the best available science, encouraging best practice adoption. An opportunity was created to capture and share industry knowledge and experience using a process for identifying drought learnings.

Drought and climate adaptation program

Process for identifying learnings

Initial inspiration

- There seemed to be a lack of available producer-contributed resources to draw on during drought
- Networking with producers revealed an understanding of their depth of knowledge in handling drought conditions and the benefits to be gained from sharing these ideas, while it is fresh in their mind

Background agenda

- Project staff who also run their own properties started the ball rolling by releasing some of their key learnings
- Producers from each of the three Leading Sheep regions were invited to contact their respective coordinator to share their key learnings

Media releases

- Learnings from producers were compiled from producers and released through media for the months of October to December, 2019

Summarising

- All learnings were compiled into a summary under key headings of 'business' and 'family'

New learnings

- With some areas of the state receiving substantial rainfall during the period of this survey, it became clear that preparing for rain is equally as important as preparing for drought
- Producers in all regions were contacted to see if they were preparing for rain and if so how they were preparing

Media release

- The purpose of sharing what the interviewed producers are doing in preparation for rain was to encourage other producers to think how they can best prepare the business, land and themselves for when it rains.
- Learnings for each of the three regions were released separately to acknowledge the varying state of drought and range of conditions across Queensland

Outcome

- Key learnings have been released for reference both during the drought and for preparation when the drought breaks
- It is recognised that there is potential for further learnings to be collected when Queensland producers are in the recovery stage
- Whilst no two droughts are the same, these collated learnings can now act as a resource for producers to use in future drought conditions

Drought and climate adaptation program

Key learnings for drought management



Key learnings for the grazing business include:

- Prepare gross margins and cash flows before restocking.
- Have flexibility in your business and decision-making options.
- Be firm with your decision-making dates, such as selling dry stock early. For example, if it hasn't rained by the 1st of January I will...
- Continue conversations with your banker to assess your options.
- Consider your total grazing pressure by including sources other than livestock e.g. kangaroos.
- Don't be afraid to sell and if you do decide to feed, ensure you calculate expenses very carefully.

"While it is still fresh in your mind do your personal Drought Management Plan with triggers, firm dates and actions" – Producer from southern Queensland.

Key learnings for managing livestock

- Effectively manage your ram and ewe conditions to achieve optimal lambing.
- Begin managing predators well before lambing.
- Establish improved pastures and slow the cross-country water flow.
- Keep stock in good enough condition that you still have options.
- Destock progressively and early.
- Gradually introduce feed to stock, especially when preparing to enter feedlots.

"Stock need to be kept in reasonable order to keep options open" – Producer from central-western Queensland.

Drought and climate adaptation program

Key learnings regarding emotional well-being

- Have off-farm focuses in the community such as sporting clubs.
- Go on a holiday or at least plan one.
- Find mechanisms that work for you to reduce stress.
- Look out for yourself, your family and your friends.
- Accept that not every decision is going to be the right one.

“Base your decisions so you remain in control and not driven by the drought” – Producer from southern Queensland.

Key learnings for when it rains



Preparing for rain during drought is equally as important as preparing for drought during a favourable season. In line with this idea, research was conducted to capture the successful management and operational actions producers take *before* and *during* drought recovery.

Key drought management actions for when it rains

- Maintain the integrity of ground cover to assist response/recovery when it does rain.
- Actively plan for the possibility of a late season or failed wet season.
- Maintain off-farm focuses, such as in local sporting teams.
- Participate in off-farm personal development, made more accessible through webinars and podcasts.
- Conduct low-cost repairs and maintenance that are overlooked when busy.
- Prepare to restock with quarantine measures in place.
- Research historical rainfall patterns and attempt to set-up the enterprise so it can fit the historical figures more often than not.
- Study benchmarking data to determine major profit drivers and the key elements to maintain through the drought to ensure you have an ‘engine’ to recover from drought.
- Exclusion fencing permits total grazing pressure to be optimally managed. Through this, country can be spelled which will change the landscape for the better. It allows better

Drought and climate adaptation program

management of resources to improve stock condition, especially when pest animal management is enforced.

- If feeding stock, be prepared to continue the feeding regime for a couple of weeks after the rain event.
- Do not rush restocking, allow time for your country to recover first.
- Ensure the areas around troughs and feeders is built up so animals have easy access to feed/water after rain.
- Try to spell a few paddocks after rain and let it go to seed before putting animals back in.
- Ensure by-washes are sound and pipes into dams are clear of debris so nothing obstructs inflow of water.
- Lie back and enjoy the sound of rain on the roof!

“Take the family out for dinner to celebrate what you did together to get through the drought.”

Further details

Producers are able to access more detail about the information above on the Leading Sheep website.

Compiling of drought learnings will continue in the hope of contributing to the wellbeing of families and businesses across the Queensland agricultural sector—in both good and challenging times.

Producers and industry representatives are invited to contribute to this discussion via your local Leading Sheep Coordinator. Contact details for each are:

- **North and Central West** – Ingrid Miller: makingmilestones@outlook.com.au 0467 566 728
- **South West** – Hannah McKillop: mckillopavondale@outlook.com 0419 954 738
- **South** – Noel O’Dempsey: odempsey@gmail.com (07) 4653 1441



Created by: Amelia Nolan, DAF GrazingFutures and Leading Sheep, Longreach

Date: June 2020

Permissions: External use