

Survival feeding in drought

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Introduction

'Survival feeding' your animals involves feeding the animals so that they maintain close to a minimum survival weight without gaining weight or where there is no excess feed supplied for production purposes. Situations where survival feeding may be employed include feeding dry cows or ewes, or maintenance feeding bulls or rams in the off-season when they are not working. The practice of survival feeding is normally not recommended and should only be used when the situation is desperate. It also has serious animal welfare implications if animals fall below minimal survival weights.

Weight loss is a normal consequence of drought, and should be controlled initially using supplements. Animals are, in effect, providing part of their daily needs from their own body reserves.

Rations for survival feeding are calculated on the minimum dietary requirements for maintenance of the animal.

Critical survival weight

When body weight falls to a critical point, the animal's body reserves are almost depleted, and any further weight loss will result in death. Below this critical survival weight, animal welfare becomes a concern (see Primefact 327 *Animal welfare in drought*).

It is strongly recommended that sheep and cattle be maintained at weights above critical weights. A feeding ration that maintains only critical survival weights for extended periods does not allow for an unexpected setback.

Adjustments should be made for larger framed or higher producing animals.

British breed cattle

The critical survival weights and recommended minimum weights for medium-maturity British breed cattle are given in Table 1. The recommended weights should ensure that cattle maintain better than fat score 1.

Table 1. Critical survival weights and recommended minimum weights for medium-maturity British breed cattle

Cattle class	Critical weight (kg)	Recommended weight (kg)
Weaners	150	200
Yearlings	225	250
Adult dry stock	300	400
Breeders	350	425

Note that individuals in the herd may be below these weights and still be in a satisfactory condition.

Sheep

Table 2 shows the minimum liveweight for various types of shorn adult sheep (based on frame size). These weights should ensure that sheep are maintained at fat score 1, and dry sheep at these minimum weights should not be at risk.

Productive sheep (breeding ewes) should be maintained above these weights. Fat scores in the range 2–3, especially if ewes are pregnant or stock are exposed to cold conditions, should be the minimum objective. Add approximately 6–8 kg of liveweight per fat score.

Weaners should be maintained at a minimum 20 kg liveweight, but it is preferable that these animals be fed to attain modest growth beyond 20 kg.



Table 2. Minimum liveweights for shorn adult sheep

Adult sheep - shorn	Minimum liveweight (kg)
South Australian merino crossbreeds, British breeds (60 kg at fat score 3)	40
Peppin-type merino and large-frame fine wool merino (50 kg at fat score 3)	35
Smaller framed fine and superfine wool merino (40 kg at fat score 3)	30

Note that individuals in the flock may be below these weights and still be in a satisfactory condition.

Animal welfare

There is a minimum acceptable animal weight and condition before the welfare of the animal becomes a concern. For more information on these animal welfare issues, see Primefact 327 *Animal welfare in drought*.

Acknowledgment

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (November 2006). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Primary Industries or the user's independent adviser.

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