

Dry summer management guide



Successful summer management depends on planning, monitoring and taking action.

In recent years, significant dry periods have been a feature of summer farming in many regions. It is important that farmers take steps to minimise the impact of a dry period to minimise stress, protect next season's production and to achieve maximum profitability from the current season.

Farmers in areas prone to dry conditions should have a well thought through contingency plan for the summer dry. The following information and resources will be useful to develop your own summer management strategy.



Have a summer management plan

Every farm should have a summer management plan. This is a must, setting out key decision points concerning stock and feed management and the dates when critical actions should occur.

Tip – For those without a plan, use the template on the back page or visit the *DairyNZ Farmfacts Summer Management Plan (1-31)* and *Setting up the farm for a dry summer (1-32)*. Alternatively, your farm consultant may be able to help you develop a plan tailored for your own situation.

Monitor the situation

Regular monitoring of both the farm and wider situation is important, as it allows you to evaluate the options available for stock and feed management, based on the most accurate information. A weekly farm walk, monthly monitoring of BCS and keeping up to date with industry online information and news will help achieve this.

DairyNZ Farmwatch: dairynz.co.nz/farmwatch

DairyNZ Farmwatch provides farmers with a weekly summary of the on-farm situation throughout New Zealand. Regional advice from DairyNZ farming specialists as well as links to other helpful regional sites are also featured.

MetService: metservice.co.nz

Short and long range regional weather forecasts are available here.

NIWA's Climate Explorer: niwa.cri.nz

Climate Explorer provides farmers and other irrigation managers a way of ensuring that irrigators are running only when they are needed. The web site provides long term trends and estimates of soil moisture levels for 80 sites around New Zealand.

Manage body condition score

Sensible management of body condition score (BCS) is crucial to the protection of next season's production. Mixed aged cows need to be at BCS 5.0 by next calving, first and second calvers at BCS 5.5, so pulling condition off them now for the sake of continued production makes no sense. It will cost you far more to put it back on later.

Monitor the BCS of your cows and heifers regularly (every 3-4 weeks), even if away at grazing during a summer dry period.

Management options include:

- Getting all known culls off the farm as soon as possible.
Don't carry cull cows for the sake of it. If sending them to slaughter, remember that they must be fit for transport and able to bear weight on all four limbs
- Drying mature animals off based on BCS and somatic cell count (SCC).
As a safeguard, have a final dry-off date and stick to it. Drying off low producers and young stock early, when they are in good condition, also makes sense, as it will reduce the pressure on the available resources
- Milking low BCS cows once-a-day in early autumn.

Tip – For more information visit dairynz.co.nz/drysummer and refer to the culling cows factsheet.

Use supplements wisely

Feeding supplements can keep animals in production longer than would otherwise be possible in a dry summer.

- First and foremost, earmark 10-14 days of supplement for the period after rain (approximately 100kg DM/cow). There will be a lot of pasture decay at this time and you will need something to keep your cows going, allowing pasture to recover. Remember to include your winter supplement requirements in your planning as well
- Supplements can increase stock water intakes, so systems must be in place to cope with the increased demand. Consider providing water in the yards to reduce the demand on troughs in the paddock after milking
- Offer pasture silage to stock first, as it will have more protein than maize silage. Avoid using autumn/winter supplements if possible. Use them only as a last resort after drying off the entire herd
- If grazing turnips, make sure you give enough of them to meet cow energy demands and that all animals can feed at once
- Bought in supplements such as Palm Kernel Extract/Tapioca mixes and maize silage are an option. Seek professional advice before using unfamiliar feed mixes on your stock.

Supplements can be profitable providing you apply best practice management and purchase the supplement at the right price.

Only purchase and feed out supplements if you have:

- Residuals below 7 clicks or less on the rising plate meter (under 1500 kgDM/ha using the winter formula)
- Determined the maximum supplement price you can afford to pay and still make a profit
- The ability to avoid feed losses and wastage when storing and feeding out the supplement.

The immediate milk response is unlikely to fully cover the cost, but if feeding results in maintaining more cows in milk when it does rain the returns can be significant.

As a rule of thumb use the milk price \$/kg MS to determine the value proposition of buying feed to feed lactating cows

The rule of thumb is - if the feed cost landed on the farm, cents/kg DM exceeds 5% of the milk price then question the likely profitability of purchasing the feed for sustaining milk production.

Example: \$6.30/kgMS milk price x 5% = 6.30 x 0.05 = 0.32 cents/kg DM. 32 cents/kgDM is a price above which careful decisions need to be made about purchasing supplements.

In this example, a profitable return from supplements costing more than 32 cents will depend on:

- The quality of the supplement – higher energy and protein makes it more affordable
- The ability to store and feed the supplement without high levels of wastage
- The likelihood that feeding supplement results in cows still milking later in the season
- Grazing residuals being above or below desired levels. Is overgrazing already occurring?

However, as not all feeds are the same in how much protein and fat they will produce for the same MS response and there are differences in the amount of supplement required for BCS gain in dry cows. The rule of thumb is just that a rule of thumb and does not apply to all situations.



Consider once-a-day milking

Alternative milking patterns, such as Once-a-day (OAD) can help take the pressure off both staff and cows and can be an attractive option.

Switching to OAD means paying close attention to mastitis detection and management, as SCC can rise to double that of cows milked twice-a-day and some cows may develop clinical mastitis.

- Be careful if your bulk SCC is over 200,000 before switching to OAD, as you run the risk of grading. At the very least, your bulk tank needs to be able to accommodate a short term (3-4 day) doubling in SCC. Consult the SAMM plan
- For those with problematic cell counts, milking 'three times in two days' is an option that can be used in extending rotation length and rationing feed. However, awkward milking times may outweigh the advantages for you.

Tip – For more visit dairynz.co.nz/drysummer and refer to the OAD Farmfacts.

Look after your irrigated pasture

If you are irrigating, monitor soil moisture levels regularly.

Have a contingency plan for when water restrictions are applied. One option is to fully water the best part of your farm, rather than watering the whole farm poorly.

Irrigated crops can provide a high return.

There may a few paddocks of deferred grazing still around. Graze these early, as both quality and quantity of feed will drop fast.

Have a plan to avoid overgrazing (grazing to less than 3.5 cm height).

Tip – Consider signing up to NIWA's Climate Explorer (niwa.cri.nz) to help with your planning.

Make best use of your farm advisors

Rural professionals, be they veterinarians, farm consultants, DairyNZ consulting officers, bankers, or feed reps all have specialist knowledge, that can help you manage a dry summer effectively. Don't be afraid to ask for help and advice as needed. At the end of the day, their business depends on the success of your business, so it's in their interest to help you get through.



Summer management action plan

The objective of the plan is to keep as many cows milking as long as possible without jeopardising next season's production. Insert your dates and figures then put on the office wall.

Note: A different plan will be required for an early summer dry than a late summer dry. Additional copies of this action plan can be found at dairynz.co.nz/drysummer

Date: / /

Building up feed before it gets dry

Apply nitrogen to whole farm by this date

Application rate of nitrogen N/ha

Rotation length by 10 December

Rotation length by 10 January

There is no advantage going onto a longer round if it is not dry. In a dry summer where nitrogen has been applied a rotation of 26-30 days will be adequate.

How much feed do I have on hand?

Supplements on hand now (A)

Supplement required for winter (B)

Supplement required for autumn rains (C)

$A - B - C =$ Total available to feed out over summer

Divided by number of cows

Total feed available per cow

Divided by feed required per cow per day

Total days feeding available

Summer crops

Planting date for summer crop

Dates nitrogen to be applied to crop

Application rate of nitrogen N/ha

Destocking

All known culls to be gone by

Whole herd pregnancy test date

Herd test to identify low producers/High SCC cows

Dry off high SCC cows once counts get over

Dry off cows once daily litres per cow drop below

Cow condition – I will dry off:

1st lactation cows under condition score 3 by

Cows under condition score 3 by

1st lactation cows under condition score 3.5 by

Cows under condition score 3.5 by

1st lactation cows under condition score 4 by

I will dry off whole herd if there is no rain before

Tools to help guide you through a dry summer period

Visit dairynz.co.nz/drysummer for a wide range of helpful advice on getting through a dry summer including:

DairyNZ Farmfacts:

- Summer management overview (1-30)
- Summer management plan (1-31)
- Setting the farm up for a dry summer (1-32)
- Management in a dry summer (1-33)
- Dry summer management – culling cows (1-33b)
- Summer nutrition (1-34)
- Summer deficit feed budget – how many cows to milk (1-35)
- Tapioca (1-70)
- Palm kernel extract (PKE) (1-71)
- Weekly/10 day feed budget template – Working backwards from target (1-82)
- Weekly/10 day feed budget template – Working forwards from pasture cover on hand (1-83)
- Facial eczema – treatment and prevention (3-6)
- Somatic cell counts (SCC) (3-10)
- Managing heat stress in dairy cows (3-15)
- Once-a-day milking (Farmfacts section 4)
- Nitrogen use going into summer (7-3)
- Nitrogen use after a dry summer (7-4).



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0800 4 DairyNZ (0800 4 324 7969)

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