

Wet Weather Management Seminars – Priorities and Options

Minimising Pasture Damage

“The key to surviving a wet spell during early lactation is to **avoid pasture damage** at all cost.”

All areas at any time during the season can potentially run into a wet spell. This wet spell will have an impact on the pasture and soil, primarily through “pugging damage.” The resultant damage may severely limit pasture production for the whole season (Up to 29% loss in annual pasture production or 200 kgMS / ha for the season). Restricted intakes will affect ‘cow condition’ and can also compromise mating performance e.g.: Empty cows and / or a longer calving spread.

TARS TRIAL

A trial was carried out in the winters of 1982 & 1983 by TARS which illustrates the benefits of good wet weather management grazing strategies.

GRAZING STRATEGY	PASTURE PRODUCTION (kgDM / ha)	% DECLINE
Mown	2030	0
On / Off (4 hr On & 20 Off)	1980	2
Block (24 hour)	1680	17
Strip (5 days)	1440	29

It clearly shows that provided cows could be moved on and off with minimal damage to pastures, an “on/off” grazing system would be recommended. Strip grazing under any circumstances would not be recommended.

The possible problems:

Compaction of the soil surface and water logging:

If the soil is partly pugged water will pond on the surface for longer. Therefore the soil will remain softer and wetter and subsequent grazings by the herd will result in further damage.

Pasture Utilisation:

Crushing, bruising, and burial in the mud of pasture, will make it unpalatable to stock and difficult to eat. Reducing utilisation by up to 50%.

How to approach the Situation:

The best and most proactive way to overcome the impact of any wet spell is to carefully plan for the various possibilities before hand. The planning process involves feed and financial. The timing of decisions is critical to surviving a wet spell and planning goes a long way to getting the timing right.

Feed Plan:

Do a feed budget to establish the targets that need to be reached to avoid feed shortages. Include in the plan Production targets, Feeding levels, Average Pasture Cover Targets at different stages, what's happening with Young Stock and Supplement strategies (Including N). Then monitor the plan regularly to ensure the set targets are achieved.

Financial Planning

1. Update your budget and adjust your expenditure accordingly and make sure that you confine the financial damage to one year only.
2. Do a cash flow to find out how much money is available for purchasing inputs e.g.: Nitrogen, Supplements, Grazing off - if these are necessary.
3. Keep your bank manager informed.
4. Think of strategies to help reduce expenditure.

Management Strategies:

Now that the wet spell has arrived there are a lot of management strategies that will help you survive.

Build the cover leading into the wet period:

Higher pasture covers will provide better physical protection against pugging. The higher farm cover means that the lower utilisation during the wet is covered. Build this into the feed budget.

Animal Health:

It is important to keep the cow healthy especially if the wet period is close to mating. Some of the things to be aware of are: Precautions against Magnesium deficiency, Mastitis, Lameness etc.

Reduce the number of cows on farm:

The most effective way of improving the feeding of the milking herd is to reduce the number of stock on the property and therefore feed demand.

Ways to do this include: Graze off late calvers; Grazing replacement stock off farm; Off farm grazing; Send cows to other farmers in a better position; Dry off cows early and graze off; Send early culls away; Get non dairy animals off farm.

Grazing Strategies:

On / off grazing: (The most effective grazing strategy)

The cows can spend as short as a couple of hours on a paddock per day if necessary to avoid damage.

Alternative places to stand cows off include - Custom built stand-off pad, waste area, yard, sacrifice paddock (Target a paddock that is to be regressed) and Races - if they are capable of standing up to it. If you are going to use these then confine cows to limit the amount of damage that is done.

Make sure whatever is used, particularly concrete, is kept free of stones, as the cows feet are extremely soft and susceptible to damage.

A footbath with zinc or copper sulphate or formalin could be used to try and harden the feet, but start this early. Keep it clean.

Mob Size:

Small mobs can be settled but they have to spend more many days in each paddock. Fewer mobs the better.

Eliminating the colostrum mob - In wet conditions the newly calved cows (colostrum mob) are often the biggest culprits in causing pasture damage, pacing back and forth looking for their calves. This advice to reduce the number of mobs comes at a time when the farmers perceive they need more mobs not less.

Aim to feed cows well as they will be more settled and walk less.
24-hour grazings for dry cows to keep them spread out.

Stock movement:

Move before daylight and at the same time if possible.
Set up tomorrow's break today.
Walk cows over the long pasture.

Paddock entry / exits:

Taking the cows in and out of different gateways will reduce the damage caused. You can also drop the wires between paddocks (e.g. Pinlock insulators) or use wire cutters to the same affect.

Sacrifice laneways down the side, to get to the back of paddocks.

Keep a note of the wet paddocks to look at during the dry period to put in multiple entries etc.

Grazing patterns:

Reducing the number of times wet areas or paddocks are grazed or walked over in wet conditions will limit damage.

Longer grass helps prevent pugging when vehicles or stock travel over the pasture.

Techniques can include: Square block breaks versus Strip grazing, Grazing the back of paddocks first, 24 hour grazings V's 12 hour to increase the area the stock are spread over, Back fence.

Rotation Length:

DO NOT alter your round length. If you go to fast then you will drop pasture cover even further. If you decide to go slower then you will underfeed your cows unnecessarily and reduce their production.

If you are already on a fast round then you will definitely need to use some form of supplements to try and slow the round down while maintaining production and mating performance.

Once a Day Milking:

Once a day milking is an option that reduces the cows demand for energy and take the pressure off the young, light and lame cows. Also useful to help with control of damage for a short term measure as cows are going in and out of paddocks less often.

Boost Feed Supply:

The economic use of N (requires planning) or other forms supplements can be effective in keeping feeding levels and residuals up and help minimise pugging.

If you have to feed supplements use them to hold (or extend) the rotation.

Purchase supplements early.

Trade stock for supplements if necessary. Feed under fences.
Purchase supplements on a cents per kgDM or ME basis.

Feeding Strategies:

The way supplements are fed can also help.
Feed out before going on to the paddock = Less walking around the break,
Feed supplements on feed pad facilities rather than on the paddock to avoid wastage and damage.
Minimise the amount of supplements fed out on paddock.
Feed out on the long grass.
Feed out at night, as cows are more settled.
Feed out before cows arrive at the paddock. E.g. the day before.
Minimise vehicle movements near stock.

Observation / Monitoring:

Whatever strategy you adopt it is critical that you constantly monitor the pasture and stock to ensure that neither is suffering and the planned strategies are working.

- Don't forget other farm management e.g. young stock if they are away grazing will still need to be checked etc.

Looking after yourself:

You, your family and your staff are the most important animals on the farm.

- Try and take time to rest and be with your family. This will reduce the stress level and allow you to make good decisions.
- Everyone thinks their problem is the worst. Go and check out your neighbour, friends and family.
- Share your problem with friends, neighbours, consultants
- Meet regularly to discuss the issues e.g. weekly.
- Get off the farm

After the Wet Management Suggestions:

- If you have sacrificed paddocks you will need to look at the regrassing options. E.g. direct drilling those poorer performing paddocks especially with Italian ryegrass will give a quick growing paddock that will yield well in the late autumn and provide high quality milking feed next spring.
- Get a drainage contractor in to drain the wetter paddocks and clear blocked culverts, which may be stopping water getting away.
- Put in multiple entry/exits into a paddocks.

Whatever you do, do something to avoid pasture damage because the rain will stop, the paddocks will dry out, and you will still have the rest of the season to get through.