



Drought Survival Stories



as told by Queensland
sheep and wool producers

Leading the way

for a more profitable Queensland
sheep and wool industry through
new technologies
knowledge and skills



This e-book is an initiative of the Leading Sheep Central West Regional Committee and contains stories written by producers, or compiled from their ideas and thoughts. The idea was conceived by producer Jan Taylor, the contents were collated by Jenny Keogh, Central West coordinator, and the publication was designed by Jane Milburn, communications coordinator.

Leading Sheep is an Australian Wool Innovation initiative in partnership with the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries and supported by AgForce, which targets the adoption of new technologies and practices to increase the productivity and profitability of the Queensland industry.

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Introduction

By Jan Taylor, Boree Downs, Longreach

Where to start? Is it the year 2000 when our “big dry” began or is it in March 2006 when the weather changed for the better?

The following survival tips and tales will encompass that whole timeframe, with all its learning curves and bad decisions bends.

The information offered here is producer-based and has been tried on-property and our continuing presence is the proof we need.

There is more to managing a dry period than just the physical day-to-day stock care. Producers have to overcome the mental flat spots that continuing pressure creates.

The strength of will to keep on climbing the mountain is vital. Combine that with a sense of humour and some community spirit and it will carry you miles when all the best plans seem to be crumbling.

I think that you may smile, or nod or shake your head while you are reading this material.

Maybe you’ll even feel a prickle behind your eyes as these tales strike a chord, or jog a “big dry” memory of your own.

The Optimism Group is part of the Leading Sheep Central West regional network. The group conceived the idea for this book because it wanted to provide, through individual stories and experiences, some tried and practical strategies to help sheep producers through their “big dry”.



PHOTOS: What a difference a month makes. Jan Taylor, above, enjoys the green landscape in April this year, while a month earlier Boree Downs’ earth looked parched and bare (below).



The WCS lament

When the rain just stopped
happening and all about looked
crook

The decision to be a 'feeder' better take a
look

At WCS had never seen it or even heard its
name

We'd all grown up with Grandad 'oh the
sheep are weak as water' what a shame.

So we phoned up all the gurus who said
she'll be alright

Just buy it by the truckload, tip it off well
what a sight

It looked like a pile of packing a giant
fluffy mess

We'd thought we'd gone quite crazy our
brains had shrunk to less!

Three weeks the guru said and they will
start to eat their lot

But no one told our bleaters not to scoff
the bloody lot

He also didn't mention, a tractor we would
need

As the family began to disappear when
came the day for 'seed'

So we've shovelled and we've bucketed
tons and tons of seed

Fed it in a thousand ways and according to
their needs

We've worn out the two shovels and tried
the many ways

Of singlehanded feeding at night and in
the days

But believe me when I tell you without it
we'd be had it

With no sheep, no cash, no drive and no
reason to still be at it!

*Written by Jan Taylor about feeding whole
cottonseed to sheep during drought.*



*Jan Taylor, above
front, at a Leading
Sheep nutrition
session at Rosebank
Research Station,
Longreach.*

Cottonseed tips

By Jan Taylor, Boree Downs, Longreach

1. HAVE THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT before you start. Tractor with bucket, shovel to hold 2 kilograms, four-wheel drive trayback ute, shovelling it off is work enough.

2. ALWAYS CHECK THE SEED when it arrives. Make sure there's no weevils or mouldy lumps. Big piles of cotton fibre are a waste of truck space and dollars. Negotiate the price down if the seed is poor. Do not buy burnt (combusted) seed at any price.

3. You can STORE THE SEED in the open. Make a raised (10cm) rectangle pad of loam 12-15 metre wide and 15-20 metre long. Pack it down well. Ensure the truck driver makes the highest pile he can covering the least ground area. Shape the pile so no water can pool in it. No kids, dogs, chooks, or horses anywhere near the pile. Cotton seed will shed rain well if it is in a smooth heap with no indentations.

4. When LOADING be careful not to spoil the heap shape. Be meticulous with your shovel to collect the seed your tractor can't gather. Try to avoid dirt in your loads as it reduces palatability and creates errors in your "weigh off".

5. ALWAYS WEIGH SEVERAL STANDARD SHOVELFULS from each new delivery. When feeding the seed, you can then shovel off with accuracy regarding your feeding rates. To guesstimate how much is in each tractor bucket lift is not good enough for accurate feeding.

6. FEEDING sheep utilise and access the cottonseed best when you feed in two kilogram shovel piles about four metres apart. Allow enough piles so no more than six adult sheep have to feed per pile. This avoids bullying. Do not scatter the seed but rather shovel it off carefully so the seed is not trampled or lost down cracks. Feed within 300 metres of each water point so sheep don't have to use energy searching for cottonseed.

7. SIT don't stand on the back of the vehicle to shovel off. This allows you to be safe (even when singlehanded) and watch the sheep. You must assess sheep condition each feed, so EYES are important.

8. ADJUST YOUR FEEDING RATES on a weekly basis allowing for A. growth (lambs) B. pregnancy status C. animal size D. weather (or predicted) conditions E. survival or production. My advice is to feed for production.

9. A 5 percent UREA based looselick or block appears to be of benefit when fed with cottonseed. The sheep have a product to access when they have eaten their seed, and it appears to assist with digestion of any dry matter they may find.

Jan Taylor is a member of The Optimism Group.

Boree Downs Cottonseed feeding rates (av)

Animal type	g/head/day
Ewes 40kg dry	80
Ewes 40kg in lamb	120
Ewes 40kg heavy in lamb	250
Ewes 40kg lamb at foot (to 10 wks)	230

Plus 40g 5 percent Urea product/head/day

Feeding a way of life

Martin Lloyd, Lorne, Blackall

story by Jane Milburn



Feeding core breeding stock through droughts is something you just get used to doing because it is part of your life, says Martin Lloyd from "Lorne" at Blackall.

Martin was born in 1961 and remembers feeding during the 1966 drought therefore is not fazed by the need to gear up to feed when conditions make that necessary.

He has been feeding on and off during the past five years, but is delighted not to be feeding at the moment because the property is drastically understocked and enough rain has fallen to produce feed for the remaining animals.

"We are running less stock this year because we believe stocking the country lightly gives it a

chance to come back – we're only running a sheep to 10 acres (4 hectares), where normally it would be a sheep to 4 acres (1.6ha)," Martin said.

The Lloyd family has been in the Blackall district since 1916 and has 26,400 ha (66,000 ac) on "Lorne" and "Tarves", which are 90km apart, that includes a mix of mitchell grass downs and buffel grass pasture.

After improving purebred Merino ewes over many years, Martin believes it is viable and worthwhile to feed these ewes through dry periods.

"There is no way we would sell off our core breeding ewes because it is too costly to buy back quality stock after rain. What you sell for \$30, you'd pay \$60 to buy back."

Martin says the feeding costs are defrayed by the ewes continuing to produce a lamb each year on feed (90% lambing rate), although he doesn't join them until they are 2½ years old when they are big enough to cope with lambing on feed.

"There are some losses from shy feeders when they start on feed, but once they get used to it we don't have many losses. If they don't want to eat, you can't make them eat."

At the start of the drought feeding regime, Martin feeds corn at a rate of one tonne per 2000 ewes per day along with either half a tonne of cottonseed per 2000 ewes or an equivalent amount of barley hay.

Continued over

Martin wants to feed and retain his core breeders through drought situations and is therefore prepared to absorb the costs, including the hidden costs of fuel, wear and tear on equipment etc.

"I wore out a motorbike doing 10,000km in 10 months mustering the stock to be fed."

Most recently, Martin fed his animals from July 2005 to February 2006 which was for eight months straight after only a four month break before that. He fed mobs of about 600, 900 and 900 in holding paddocks of 160 ha (400 ac) each.

He fed every day at the same time to keep the animals in a routine after finding that if he was even half an hour late they would walk away. The feeding routine took two hours.

"We are set up to feed with elevated silos that have been in place for 20 years. From these the corn runs out with an auger into a bin on the trailer. The cottonseed is dropped in a heap on the ground from an open bin on the back of the Nissan. We put Phoslick in troughs for the lambing ewes."

"We started feeding corn and cottonseed but the sheep weren't doing well enough on that so we changed to barley hay and corn to provide roughage to fill them up."



"We put the half-tonne round bales of barley hay on the back of the vehicle, unravel it and drop it on top of the corn. It is a two-person job, one to drive and one to feed."

Lorne has had rain therefore the feeding routine is over for now and

the investment has paid off with the ewes set to lamb shortly (August 2006).

"The law of averages says that it has to rain eventually, so how many years you feed is only dependent on how deep your pockets are."

The feed regime at Lorne

- Corn and cottonseed to start
- 1/2 kg corn + 1/4 kg cottonseed per head per day
- Introduced Phoslick before lambing started
- Phoslick 50 kg per 900 head per day
- January 2006 cut out cottonseed and Phoslick and introduced barley hay
- Barley hay 30 small bales per day to 2367 ewes and 2301 lambs
- All sheep were fed every day
- One paddock was fed around the water, the other two paddocks were away from it due to better ground and easy access

Corn \$210 per tonne delivered
Cottonseed \$215 per tonne delivered

Learn to plan ahead

By Paula Dean, Notus Downs, Longreach

The drought of 2005 was a testing time. With wool prices questionable, I had to decide would I feed and pump water or just sell the livestock and buy again when it rained?

I'm glad of my decision and the following is a summary of my time.

"Notus Downs" is about 12,500 ha (30,000 ac). It is all very open, heavy downs country and has all surface water.

The water situation is the first issue. Seven dams varying between 25,000-45,000 cubic metres then piped to eleven 5000 gallon (22,750 litre) tanks with troughs. The dams are unfenced, with the troughs being in other sites in the paddocks.

Problem one: water. Only three dams had water and none of them were the ones that were equipped or linked to the pipelines. So I purchased polypipe and decided to hook the house dam, the largest on the best catchment, into the livestock system and pump backwards ... check valves etc all swapped.

This sounds easy but isn't it amazing when it's 45 degrees how much water they drink? So I ended up with pumps at various tanks along the

way to push the water on to where it was needed.

Problem two: feed. I had to plan the feed because I really didn't have much grass, just leftover dry herbage from the June rain. The plan was to feed cottonseed which was easy to access, store, load and SHOVEL.

I assessed the sheep visually on their condition and the condition of the paddocks. Some shifting happened because I also had to have them where I knew I could get WATER to them.

I had separated my ewes into wet and dry mobs at lambmarking in July and had two paddocks with 1000 ewes and 1000 lambs each and in other paddocks 1000 dry and 1000 hoggets - making a total of 6000 mouths to feed.

After marking my lambs, I started to feed the wet ewes. I find this teaches the lambs to feed so when they are separated they go on to their ration very quickly.

The feeding for the first month was really just the teaching process so was not over indulgent, but always at the same time of the day every fourth day. For me, I found feeding about 4pm worked best ... remember it's HOT.

I was able to load the seed (not a stressful job as I have a tractor) have a cuppa then into the air-conditioned Triton and drive to the waters. Being hot, the sheep would still be camped but all watered, so if some rushed off at least they had had a drink.

The dropping of four days worth ensured that when the shy sheep returned, there would still be feed available. As I had four paddocks of sheep for a while, I just fed one a day and marked on the calendar when each paddock was due.

September arrived and I weaned. Normally I sell the wether lambs but no \$\$\$ so decided they would be cheap to feed.

Now I had six paddocks, so some days I would feed two and I'm on to a 3-day feeding round.

I had all the wet ewes and hoggets on 150g/day to lift them ready to join October 25. The dries on 100g to maintain and the lambs on 80g - this equated to a load to each paddock, with a load doing all the lambs.

I always counted the shovels off and if there was a bit leftover, I left it on to go with the next load as all those little bits end up costing \$\$\$.

I work on my own and could not afford to be injured, so I would put the vehicle in low-range 1st gear and just walk along beside pulling shovelfuls down. About eight sheep can get around a shovel (3kg).

October arrived and me, the absolute optimist, had the opportunity to buy 900 top class hoggets next door so I did. I shored and sold my wether lambs (market improved).

Feeding continued and the water situation was sort of under control. I fed 4900 ewes and joined 700 of them (six-year-olds) to Coolalee rams in mid-September and the others in October as planned.

The rams had been fed at home on grass hay ad lib, plus an oats/cottonseed/lucerne ration. In November I took the Coolalee rams out, 700 shorn and sold joined. Feeding continues. In December I shear, and a storm would be nice!!!

On December 15, I start shearing. Sheep are being fed ad lib cottonseed in the holding paddock on the way into the shed and out to help with the stress of shearing. Rams are taken out and look like they've been busy – let's hope.

The ration is now lifted. All ewes on 175g, ewe weaners which were only crutched are on to 100g. Everyone looking well.

January no change.

February, 1000 ewe weaners shorn. I would have to say when March came I was thinking maybe I should have sold the sheep and most definitely was thinking I shouldn't have bought the 900 hoggets. But what's done is done, so one must go on.

March 9 it's rained 75mm. The water drama is one that is resolved instantly, as all dams are at least half full.

I continued to feed the sheep as they were all due to start to lamb 25th March (it was sell that week it rained as I knew I couldn't handle seeing all the lambs die.

The ewes didn't start to drop lambs until April 4 and that is when I STOPPED feeding.

On April 16 another 75mm – perfect for lambing. All except two dams full. Would I do it again? YES but I wouldn't buy the extras. Lambmarking is done, 74 percent. About to start feeding wet ewes so their lambs learn all about feed prior to weaning. Let's hope I can sell the wether weaners this time.

The season really is just average here, with only the two falls of rain. I had no grass response only herbage which now is all dry and a little grey-looking from three lots of 5mm falls.

So we go on.

Paula Dean is a member of The Optimism Group.

Some essential things

before doing what I've done.

- 1. A plan**
- 2. A big heart**
- 3. Reliable supply of cottonseed**
- 4. A tractor**
- 5. A shovel**
- 6. Someone to talk with to keep you sane!!!**

Strategies differ

By John Milne, Loongana, Longreach

We have 34,000 acres (13,600 ha) of Mitchell Grass country about 30km south of Longreach. There are belts of Boree and Gidgee and other timbers such as Whitewood, Vine Tree and Coolibah along the creeks.

We run sheep and cattle self-replacing mobs. Since 1980, we have experienced three droughts, the current drought has not yet broken for us (at time of writing) and has been more widespread and of longer duration than the others.

I have found that each drought is different and therefore we have to be prepared to use different strategies where necessary. Even in the same district, each producer operates under quite different constraints so what I do may not suit someone else's operation.

I think that when we go into drought, we need to be aware that whatever course of action we take we will do some things right and some things wrong – we will only know with the benefit of hindsight.

I always keep in mind (when I'm having a whinge) that there are others who are doing it a lot harder than us. One of the positives about adversity is that hard



times bring the best out in people.

Our drought preparedness begins when the seasons are good. This is when we take the opportunity to get our water facilities up to scratch. We pump dams out and de-silt rather than waiting for them to dry up during drought. We also work on mills, pumps, pipelines, tanks and troughs. We lift the standard of stock we carry by culling aged stock, upgrading rams and bulls, and try to achieve the best lambing and calving rates we can. We also look at our finances and business management and strive to have them in good order prior to drought.

As the season turns dry, the first thing we do is lighten stock numbers. Usually we start by

selling dry stock and older animals then, where possible, we get core breeding stock off on to agistment. Cattle are the first to move to agistment when the bulk of pasture gets too low.

This leaves us with a nucleus of breeding ewes on the place which we can then spread out as much as possible and maintain with supplement. The type of supplement used depends on price and availability. Price often increases as the drought sets in and the ration per head might need to be lifted as time goes on.

Stock need to be kept in strong condition so that they have the ability to forage and get through rain events when they happen. In the past we

Continued over



have supplemented with molasses and protein meal, grains and hay. During this drought we have fed cottonseed. We have found cottonseed to be an extremely effective supplement with several advantages over other feeds. It can be stored out in the open for years if fenced off on a well-drained flat. It is safe to feed as it tends to be self-limiting and stock seem to keep up a level of production as well as condition.

Early in this drought I learnt a valuable lesson about how to feed. We were looking after about 800 weaner sheep in a small paddock (40 ha or 100 ac) on a full ration of prime lucerne. We had a stockpile of large rectangle bales in the paddock and started by feeding out beside the hay pile – that is we threw the hay out in about a 30m radius.

From the day we started we were losing on average one sheep per day and had an obvious tail in the mob. After a couple of

weeks we changed the feeding method – we used a Lindsell Hoist to lift a bale on to the vehicle, then spread the hay over about 500m. The change in the mob was quite amazing. We stopped losing them from the first day and after a couple of weeks the tail had improved so much it had disappeared.

The obvious lesson is that the feed or feed supplement needs to be spread enough so that all stock get a go at it without undue competition between strong and weak animals. With this in mind, the way we distribute

cottonseed is to shovel it out, spreading it as much as possible.

To start sheep on it for the first time, we put it out in small piles close to water then as they start eating it we move it out a bit further and spread it more. We try to put it out on clean ground, ie not on sheep camp sites. We found it best to establish set feeding sites and regular times around waters and feed out every 2-3 days. This way all the sheep in the paddock tend to camp at those sites, at those feeding times, so that every sheep in the mob gets a ration.

Sheep become very quiet and if lambing, ewes don't take fright at a vehicle and leave their lambs – in fact they follow it. We've found that if the feed times and places are irregular, and sheep are scattered when you drive out to feed, the ewes will hear the vehicle and race in to get a feed and leave their lambs behind, vulnerable to predators. We've



noticed that sheep seem to immediately lose interest in cottonseed when there is rain about. We think that a shower of rain softens up the old black stalk and they fill up on it.

When you have very low stock numbers during drought, tree fall and forage become very beneficial. When Mimosa goes to seed, stock can actually pick up quite well on it. They also fill up well on Boree and vine tree leaf after a good wind.

I think that it is crucial not to let stock bog in waterholes and dams during drought. Once they've been bogged they rarely make it through the drought. Ideally all dams should be equipped with tanks and troughs. Even if the dams are not fenced, stock tend to move on to troughs when the dams get low. On this black soil country, it is better if cattle are kept off dams altogether. Sheep are OK on open dams until they get low and boggy, at that stage they start to foul the water by continually stirring the black sediment



around the edges which then feeds the blue green algae leading to algal blooms. In our experience these algal blooms can cause sickness and even death in stock if there is no alternative water.

We go through a range of mental conditions when battling drought – depression, worry, panic, you name it. There is nothing more depressing than seeing sheep or cattle die each day, so we need to make sure remaining stock have adequate feed or agistment.

A big worry a lot of people have during drought is finance. We sometimes get preoccupied with day-to-

day drought management and lose sight of finance. It's a terrible feeling to suddenly realise that your overdraft is almost fully drawn and there are some big bills sitting on the desk waiting to be paid. Most of the time this worry can be avoided by budgeting and reviewing finance requirements, and applying to increase credit where necessary. This should be done well before all existing finance is used up. It is not very professional to go to the bank manager after it is all used up!

We need to keep in mind that a bad drought is a type of natural disaster and therefore can't be controlled or accurately predicted. All we can do is manage the effects with a bit of forward planning. I think that the best attitude to adopt is to treat drought as a challenge and just do our best with the season we are given. All droughts come to an end, and the most productive years are usually the ones following drought.

John Milne is a member of The Optimism Group.



Managing drought

Dick O'Connell, Wombula, Thargomindah

story by Jane Milburn

Drought only has the power you give it, according to Dick O'Connell from 70,000 ha (175,000 ac) "Wombula" 50km south-east of Thargomindah.

It is a simple choice – you either let drought "beat you up" or instead look for the good side of the bad situation.

Dick and Donna O'Connell's country is in the worst grip of the current drought to date and virtually destocked. The land is asleep, resting out this extended dormancy.

"We are waiting for a one-in-ten year chain of rainfall events before we restock. We need several rainfall events with good, repeated rain before our country will be back into anything resembling normal production."

When the O'Connell's faced the reality of the progressively worsening drought, they decided their most viable course of action was to destock and preserve their financial position as best they could.

"In this country good rain can come at any time, so it is easy to put off tough decisions and keep believing that a big enough storm will come to get us out of trouble."

"Our total rainfall in 2002 was 37mm. We kept 8000 sheep and 1500 cattle in good health feeding mulga and lick through '02 and '03 but had to revise our strategy when little rain came in early '04."

"We progressively sold off our stock while they were still in good condition and when stock markets were on fire. We used the proceeds from those sales to retire our farm debt and invested what was left off the property. Each year the drought continues makes us glad we decided to sell."

Dick had always regarded himself as a breeder and holder of stock, not a seller, so this drought strategy involved a shift in his traditional thinking.

"Being able to feed substantial numbers of stock on harvested mulga through "normal" drought tends to make us very reluctant sellers. Mulga is different from the grass country in that way, therefore I had to change my thinking and view selling in a more positive manner."

"In earlier droughts, we used to just buy more diesel and push more mulga to feed the stock, happy knowing also that after rain we would have substantial areas of

renewed pasture as well as stock. But this drought has been so severe, with large areas of mulga dead or near dead that we had to consider other strategies."

The O'Connells attribute their changed approach to new knowledge and different ways of thinking gained through their education experience with Resource Consulting Services (RCS) during recent years.

After Dick did the Grazing for Profit course in 1995 he became aware of the possibilities. Dick and Donna followed up with the Graduate Link course in 2002 and then went on to the Executive Link course which is run over three years.

"The RCS Executive Link program involves a board discussion situation, where issues are discussed around the table by progressive producers who help each other face the available options."

"It facilitates better decision making. Instead of putting tough decisions off, as we might have done, the board makes you face the options, and the choices become clearer and the likely outcomes of action or inaction obvious."

"It's enabled us to deal

with the drought crisis significantly better than we might otherwise have done, and helped by exposing us to off-property investment.

"Although this drought is not yet over, we believe we'll come out of it better financially and mentally than we would have without the training. It has taught us to act in difficult circumstances rather than procrastinate until it is too late."

The O'Connells current drought strategy involves taking windows of opportunity that arise by trading with a few stock, and waiting for decent rain before resuming normal production again.

"For the past five years we have been selling stock down, and the liquidation of the livestock has been our income during that period."

"We've also been opportunity harvesting rangeland goats which have bred up and been drifting south in bigger numbers. We've made some money out of them because they're a high gross margin enterprise with only instant mustering costs and no ongoing labour costs."

"They thrive in our environment and breed well in tougher conditions, but fences mean nothing to them so that's a problem. However our destocking has attracted goats because there's fresh



regrowth on the pushed mulga."

"A very logical path forward would be to restock with goats, but the problem would be to contain them without spending huge sums on fencing."

Dick the optimist chooses not to make too much of the extensively talked about "climate change" and its relationship to the current drought, and says there is evidence of these similar runs of poor seasons at the turn of the century.

"Sure this is a rotten period of years but it will be good when they have passed, as it will be unlikely we'll have to deal with such a prolonged drought again, because the chances are they will be

followed by a good run of seasons."

"Our country suits diversity, so when the good seasons return we'll restock with sheep, cattle and goats to spread our risk across a range of commodities."

"We're focusing on off-farm investment and trading some agistment cattle in the north, while we wait for the big break in the season."

"There is always a good side to bad news and we've preserved our position well considering the drought, and will emerge from the oven a lot wiser than we entered it."