



Preparing for a Dry Summer: Lessons from Farmers and Experts

Key messages from the "Preparing for El Niño" farmer panel

The strongest message from all speakers was simple: plan early, make decisions early, and protect your breeding stock. Whether a severe drought develops or not, having a plan in place gives you more options and reduces stress when conditions tighten.

1. Have a Plan and Set Trigger Points

All three farmers stressed the importance of planning ahead rather than reacting when feed runs short.

Key actions:

- Complete regular feed budgets and monitor pasture covers.
- Set clear trigger points and write them down.
- Decide in advance what actions you will take if rainfall, feed levels, stock weights or body condition fall below target.
- Review progress monthly and track key farm performance indicators.
- Examples of trigger points:
 - Pasture covers not increasing through November.
 - Lamb growth rates slowing.
 - Breeding ewe body condition declining.
 - Capital stock losing weight.
 - Rainfall significantly below normal.

"No one regrets making an early decision in a drought. Early decisions create options."

2. Protect Your Breeding Stock

The panel unanimously agreed that breeding ewes and cows are the engine room of the farm business.

- During dry periods:
 - Prioritise feed for breeding stock.
 - Maintain ewe body condition through weaning and mating.
 - Avoid sacrificing ewe condition to finish lambs.
 - Cull poor-performing or aged stock early.
 - Identify poorer-conditioned ewes before lambing and give them priority feeding.
 - Several speakers reflected that some of their best drought decisions involved selling lambs earlier than planned to preserve ewe condition and future production.

"You can easily see the value of another kilogram on a lamb. It's harder to see what losing condition in a ewe costs next year."

3. Create Flexibility in Your Farming System

Farms that cope best with drought generally have more levers they can pull.

Examples included:

- Carrying trade cattle that can be sold if needed.
- Using forage crops to create feed buffers.



- Having alternative water supplies.
- Maintaining relationships with graziers and finishing properties.
- Having multiple stock classes that can be sold if conditions deteriorate.
- Flexibility allows farmers to protect their core breeding flock and herd while reducing overall feed demand.

4. Use Crops Strategically

Several panellists highlighted how crops can dramatically reduce pressure on pasture.

Benefits included:

- Freeing up large areas of pasture.
- Protecting pasture persistence.
- Creating feed reserves.
- Improving ewe performance.
- Examples discussed included:
 - Chicory and plantain for lamb finishing.
 - Kale and brassica crops for ewes.
 - Fodder beet and cereal crops where appropriate.
- Small areas of forage crops generating significant feed savings across the farm.
- The key message was to:
 - Grow crops with a clear purpose.
 - Manage them carefully.
 - Make full use of them when conditions become challenging.

5. Think Carefully Before Buying Supplement

Supplement can be valuable, but speakers encouraged farmers to calculate the economics before purchasing feed.

Questions to ask:

- What is the true cost per kilogram of dry matter delivered?
- Is it economic to feed this stock class?
- Would selling stock earlier provide a better outcome?
- In some situations, preserving breeding stock with supplementary feed makes sense. In others, selling stock early may be the more profitable and less stressful option.

6. Consider Early Weaning

Early weaning was highlighted as a useful tool when feed quality declines.

Benefits include:

- Removing nutritional pressure from ewes.
- Allowing ewes to regain condition sooner.
- Giving lambs access to higher-quality feed.
- Creating feed flexibility.
- Some farmers indicated they would bring weaning forward if dry conditions emerged and pasture quality began to deteriorate.



7. Monitor Stock Closely

Successful decisions are based on good information.

Farmers discussed:

- Regular weighing of lambs.
- Body condition scoring ewes.
- Monitoring pasture cover and feed growth.
- Tracking monthly KPIs.
- Monitoring allows decisions to be made while options still exist.

"If you're not measuring it, you're guessing."

8. Water Security Matters

Feed shortages are often the focus, but water availability can become equally important.

Actions taken by farmers included:

- Improving reticulation systems.
- Installing backup water supplies.
- Developing alternative sources such as springs.
- Reviewing vulnerable points in existing systems.

9. Animal Health Considerations

Veterinary advice focused on maintaining animal resilience during dry periods.

Key considerations:

- Maintain body condition to support immunity and production.
- Ensure access to quality water.
- Watch for metabolic and nutritional issues when introducing supplements.
- Introduce grain gradually and manage transitions carefully.
- Continue monitoring parasites and animal health challenges.
- Be aware of increasing facial eczema risk in susceptible areas.
- When feeding grain:
 - Introduce stock slowly.
 - Use good-quality roughage alongside grain.
 - Ensure adequate water.
- Monitor animals closely during the transition period.

10. Look After Yourself as Well

One of the strongest themes from the panel discussion was farmer wellbeing.

Suggestions included:

- Talk to neighbours and farming friends.
- Reach out to Rural Support Trust or support networks if needed.
- Keep doing activities that help you switch off.
- Make time away from the farm.
- Be aware when stress levels are rising.
- Include family in discussions and be conscious of the impact on children.



- Speakers noted that droughts place pressure on everyone, but isolation often makes situations feel worse.

"Don't lean on the gate by yourself. Talk to your mates."

Top 5 Take-Home Messages

1. Plan now

Create written drought and dry-season trigger points before conditions deteriorate.

2. Protect breeding stock

Prioritise ewe and cow condition over finishing stock.

3. Make decisions early

Early sales and management changes preserve options and reduce pressure.

4. Monitor regularly

Use feed budgets, pasture measurements, stock weights and body condition scoring.

5. Stay connected

Use support networks, talk to others and look after your own wellbeing as carefully as your livestock.

Bottom line:

Farmers who came through previous droughts best were not necessarily those with the most feed, but those who had a plan, monitored conditions closely, made early decisions, and focused on protecting the productive core of their farming business.