

For many farmers this season has been the mother of all seasons. Having a drought on top of a year with extremely low returns for lamb and beef, combined with forever escalating costs and diminishing practical regulation we often ponder why we are in this game. To complicate matters, this season will have implications within the farm gate well beyond the first rains. Outlined below are just a few things we should be thinking about now to get us through the short term.

1. Compensatory growth

When a drought finally breaks there is always some compensatory growth brought about, simplistically, by the decomposition of organic matter into nitrogen. The amount of compensatory growth will be dependent on moisture levels once the rains come, soil temperature and the amount of organic matter decomposed in the soil.

This compensatory growth will mean the effectiveness of nitrogenous fertiliser applications immediately following a drought will be significantly reduced.

2. Facial eczema

Following the recent “dust settler” showers the facial eczema spore counts has slowly increased. Just because the level of “storky” and dead material has gone doesn’t mean facial eczema won’t be a problem. Covers are extremely low in some districts that grazing is occurring at the ground or dirt level where the spores are present. Monitoring of spore levels over the next couple of months is critical along with a plan on what to do if trigger levels are reached.

3. Potential increased erosion

Many soils in New Zealand have this unique tendency to shrink when dry and swell when wet. Some soils also have the tendency to become hydrophobic (repel water) once their moisture levels have been lowered beyond a certain level. This will encourage increased surface runoff especially so when combined with a lack of vegetative cover that normally traps surface wash. Much of this surface runoff will end up in cracks or creeks. Surface runoff will entrain both sediment and nutrients in the process.

4. Increased pressures on gully systems

Many gully systems in the hill country were clogged with sediment following 2004 and the winter of 2005. These systems are now slowly cutting down back to harder material. With increased grazing pressure in these areas over the past three or four months resulting in low pasture levels will mean that water flowing through these gully systems will be accelerated along with its erosive powers.

Further to this, gully systems often contain soils with very weak structure and fine textures. With very little vegetative cover this is a sure recipe for conditions suited to pugging and treading damage by heavy cattle as soon as they wet up. Allowing this to happen will cause accelerated gully erosion along with degraded water quality down stream.

4. Weed infestations in the pasture sward

Pastures will become open during drought conditions. This will result in increased weed invasion.

5. Lower ewe weights

The biggest impact farmers will notice is lower ewe weights right now at tupping. This will result in a reduced lambing percentage. It may require a revised lambing and grazing management strategy for the winter/spring. This could be turned into an opportunity with a focus on getting lambs away earlier next season. To do this still

requires scanning this winter followed by differential grazing. It also requires comprehensive feed budgeting starting now if not already.

6. Increased incidence of diplodia in forestry

For the foresters out there you can expect a higher incidence of diplodia once there is a bit more moisture around. Diplodia, like facial eczema, is caused by fungus spores which rapidly increase under the right conditions. Trees can be a bit like humans when under stress, the opportunities for infection are magnified when the defence forces are stretched. Often scratches and branch breakage by possums or livestock rubbings create areas for infection to occur. This makes the need for possum control in forestry critical in drought conditions.

7. Higher losses of soil conservation plantings

One thing we have noticed around the traps this summer is the higher rates of failure of late winters soil conservation plantings. This is solely due to the drought. Soil conditions will need to be monitored for planting this winter. If the dryness continues it may be better to postpone this winters planting to next year or revise planting strategies to concentrate on the wetter shady slopes or gully systems. For soil conservation plantings to be effective, they must have the right density. Hence it is imperative that failures are blanked.

Many farmers have missed the opportunity of using existing mature poplars and willows this summer as a feed supply.

One thing is for certain, like winter storm events, droughts like '08 will come occur again and it is the wise that future proof their business to handle abnormalities in the weather.



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