

Drought Management: A southern rangeland perspective on why I consider “conservative set stocking” a myth.

Angus Whyte – Pastoralist;

Tanisha Shields – Senior Land Services Officer Western LLS

wyndham3@bigpond.com

What is “Conservative set Stocking”?

I define this as setting stocking rates at a conservative level, one that can be carried in most years. For example, in a region where the area average stocking rate might be 1 sheep to 6ha, conservative stocking might be 1 sheep to 8ha.

A Better Approach:

The theme of this presentation is to highlight that while conservative set stocking is considered to be the one of the better approaches to livestock management, I believe this needs to change to a conservative use of resources, especially in an extremely variable climate. A conservative use of resources is quantifying what feed you have, what feed you expect to grow in the current season and then setting your stocking levels accordingly. We are currently going through a period with highly variable and unreliable climatic conditions, and we need to make sure that our farming systems are fit for purpose. Set stocking livestock systems pose a risk to the decision making process, as managers are making less decisions. If you are constantly reviewing your management and have good communication with your “key business partners” (stock agents, bank managers etc.) then decisions are the norm, making change easier. Properties who plan their grazing and management could destock/restock in response to seasonal changes in a flexible way. The more agile the management is, the better they will be suited to a highly variable rangeland environment.

Change Required:

To equip producers to make the above changes to management systems, there needs to be changes in the supply of data from extension agencies. This could include data which assists land managers to quantify and forecast feed supply. Then managers would need to set their livestock grazing system up to be flexible, from a livestock and money perspective.

There would need to be an induction system in management, for livestock so they could understand how to operate on extensive landscapes. We need to see a change in industry attitudes, as currently there is pressure on farmers from further up the chain to continue to have a production system through droughts, thereby not acknowledging the risks to farming businesses. We need to make sure that a value is placed on the landscape health, so that the cost of livestock decisions can be visualised and reconciled. This would also help to disconnect the farmer from the livestock for their identity, enabling timely decisions to be made. The decision to downsize a flock or herd needs to be treated with the same level of importance as if you had to downsize an office or laboratory, very tough decisions to make.

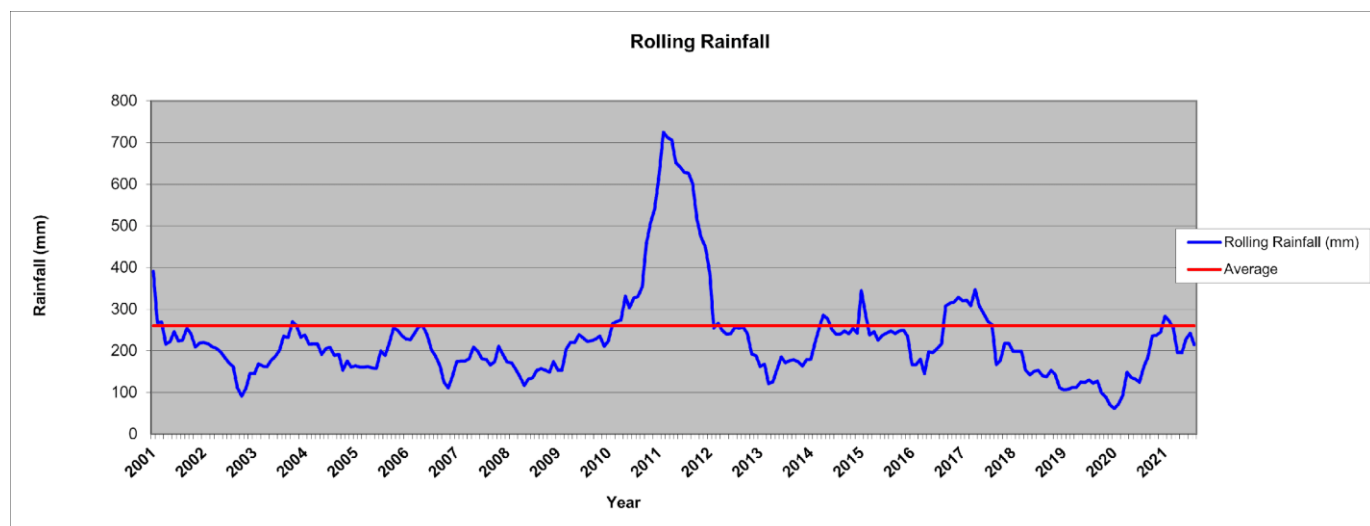


Figure 1: Rolling rainfall at "Wyndham" from 2001 through to 2021.

Factors for any drought management:

The following are key considerations for landholders when managing a rangeland property, especially in a drought.

- animal welfare –never compromise the welfare of the livestock.
- the land –keeping ecosystem and landscape integrity intact.
- the people – the physical and mental well-being of those on the land is extremely important and critical for decision making in stressful times.
- finances – maintaining the balance between cashflow and long-term prosperity of the business.
- community – ensuring local communities are able to function and support each other through continuing to promote social activities.

Tools/options for management:

- supplementary feeding – preferably in confinement areas.
- purchasing additional land where there is available feed.
- selling livestock – including options such as outright sell, sell and replace with smaller animals, keep dry animals.
- agist livestock– this will also build relationships in other areas and increase your network.
- lease livestock - allows you to retain ownership of livestock for when rain falls.

These options should never be viewed as an either/or option. They should form a combination - which is going to work best for my unique situation? One of the keys to enable a clear destocking or restocking strategy is to have a clear direction for your livestock business. If you have set clear traits that you are managing for, then you can class your flock/herd, identify diversity and thereby a selling order.

Our unique example:

The last drought, from the end of 2016 to the start of 2020, was very prolonged and resulted in significant soil moisture depletion, as demonstrated in figure 1 by the rolling rainfall. Although we started destocking in late 2016 and kept destocking in small chunks until 2018, our land still ended up very bare and windblown. You can't manage a major drought, same as you can't manage a major flood, all you can do is minimise damage on many fronts. We chose to retain the best 20% of our ewes and not feed or join them for 2 years, which reduced production, however we did not incur the cost of hand feeding. Importantly we kept them in relatively large mobs (4 mobs of 500), changing paddocks regularly, that way we could keep them in reasonable order and still respect our landscape.

We have had about 3 significant destocks here in the last 20 years and because we have reviewed our actions, we have improved at making timely and necessary selling decisions. The main drivers in our business to making timely decisions are:

- We place a very high value on our state of mind – The most valuable asset in a small business is the state of mind of the key decision makers.
- We value the relationship we have with our key business partners and seek their counsel in decision making.
- We value our landscape and the reduction in threatening processes, such as erosion or lack of biodiversity
- We don't hand feed our commercial stock, there is no safety net in our business.

We chose to only use the "sell" option, with many variations, sometimes selling heavy stock, purchasing lighter, younger stock. Other times selling twice as many as required, then buying ½ the amount back, thereby having turnover and trading. A lack of tools and actions to control native grazers, especially kangaroos, was very noticeable through this period.

Knowledge and support to aid our decisions:

We are always seeking knowledge to help us in our connection to our land and ability to manage our business so that it can meet our standards. Here is what we value in our business:

- Grazing For Profit – A simple straightforward course that begins your journey in improving the management of your farming business.
- Low Stress Stock Handling – Essential when introducing stock as well as being able to manage large mobs in a rotation.
- KLR Marketing – Gives us a better understanding of identifying those animals best suited to the current pasture and understanding what we do well/poorly.
- Using consultants that not only support our decisions, they challenge us as well.
- Accessing relevant R&D as well as building relationships with researchers and extension staff.
- Gain a broad perspective on issues and how other people are making decisions through use of social media, Twitter, Facebook.
- Connect to like-minded people that have similar values

Conclusion:

I know there has been lots of R&D on drought management done, the fact that very little of it has been adopted suggests there is a failure in our current system. I will list a couple of examples below:

- KLR Marketing and RCS are the only groups that understand and can talk about practical destocking/restocking options.
- MLA, AWI and stock agents keep telling farmers that hand feeding is the best option so that they can have continuity of supply.
- The farming culture is that we tough it out, live in hope and our identity is linked to our livestock, i.e. Sheep farmer, cattle farmer.
- Researchers have fantastic skills in setting up and running projects, farmers have great skills especially in handling stock, both need to work together to recognise and respect each other's skill set. The lack of projects set up in this way reduces the uptake and the respect between each group.

I see a very bright future for us to work together as a community to improve the management of our beautiful Rangelands, while enabling a thriving community in the heart of our continent based around good land management.