

RECOVERING FROM FLOOD

SOUTH-EAST AUSTRALIA

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It's easy to become overwhelmed after a flood event. It may help to take a bit of time to jot down all the jobs that need to be done. The headings below and the attached table may help you put things in priority order.

People

Your business recovery could be set-back if you rush or make poor decisions – try to include sufficient 'down-time' to ensure you are well equipped emotionally and physically to navigate the path ahead.

Use a trusted adviser to work through different options and strategies – does the event provide any opportunities for process or farm design improvements?

Review your staffing needs – are there resources and government assistance available to help?

Take time to communicate your plans to family and employees.

Stock

Animal welfare

Immediately do an inventory of all stock and identify missing animals.

When stock have been moved to a new area to escape flood waters, ensure that it is free of hazardous objects e.g. old equipment, chemical containers, bale wrap.

Thoroughly assess sick or injured stock. Seek veterinary advice if necessary. If recovery is unlikely (e.g. from clinical mastitis or lameness), consider culling or humane euthanasia. Be practical – time spent on poor prognosis animals could distract you from providing better care to the rest of the herd.

Feed/water/nutrition

Write down an inventory of feed availability as soon as it is safe to do so. For each type of feed, write down the quantity (tonnes, number of bales), its quality, accessibility and whether it was flooded or rained on. Use the inventory to budget daily cow requirements. Take photos of feeds or places where feeds were stored prior to the flood.

Check water source(s) and see if there has been any damage to pumps or contamination of water supplying house, dairy shed and troughs. Test water as necessary. If multiple water sources are available, use the source with the least nutrient and microbial contamination. Consult an expert for advice if necessary.

Wherever possible make feed mix changes slowly.

In normal circumstances a 550kg cow will eat about 3–3.5 per cent of her liveweight as daily DM intake. This equals 16–19 kg DM/day.

After a major flood event, cows may be unsettled and continuity of feed intake may be disrupted for a few days.

Try and use 'safer' feeds such as hay/silage or pasture as the main component of the diet until the cows settle back into a routine. Keeping the forage/concentrate ration at 70:30 or greater in this period will limit the risk of rumen dysfunction.

Milk yields may suffer initially but should recover within a few days.

Herds feeding high levels of grain (7kg or more/cow/day) are more at risk of acidosis from a disrupted daily feed intake pattern.

Reduce concentrate feeding to a moderate level (~3–4kg/day) for a few days and gradually increase back up to the pre-flood feeding rate over several days.

A good rule of thumb is to not change the grain feeding rate by more than 1kg/cow per day.

Remember energy requirements increase with pregnancy and if cows need to walk longer distances.

After a stressful event, reintroduce a fibre source (hay) and consider using magnesium oxide (MgO) at 60 grams/cow/day over the hay to reduce the chance of grass tetany (hypomagnesaemia).

Check feeds for mould and if concerned, test at a feed lab. Use management tools to reduce the impact of mycotoxins on animal health and performance.

Check damp hay stores for risk of spontaneous combustion.

Health

Mastitis

If labour resources allow; reduce the risk of clinical mastitis by the following steps:

- Wash and dry all teats before cups go on (always use new paper towel for each cow)
- Strip cows every day to detect, treat and isolate clinical days
- Ensure you cover all surfaces of all four teats with teat disinfectant
- Keep teats clean and dry for at least an hour after the cows leave the shed, and
- Set up feeding and other routines so cows don't lie down soon after milking.

Lameness

Identify lame cows and separate into smaller groups, close to the dairy, on the best feed available – consider milking them once a day.

Treat lame cows as soon as possible – it will be a win/win for their welfare and your business (remember to observe any withhold periods for antibiotic treated cows).

Be very patient when moving all cows – tell staff to expect it to take twice as long as usual. Reschedule staff working hours to accommodate the change in routine.

Try to keep yard concrete clear of stones to reduce injury to soft feet – e.g. putting in a 125mm post at the entrance to the yard will help reduce the stones lifted onto the yard.

Consider using material (>30cm deep) over damaged parts of the laneways to reduce injury to cow's feet (within 30m of dairy yard) such as wood chips, sawdust, limestone.

Downer cows

Provide feed, water, bedding and shelter for downer cows. If you do not have time to provide an appropriate level of nursing care, including lifting and regular assessments, you must consider humanely euthanasing the cow. Downer cows must never be left in the paddock without feed, water, bedding, shelter and confinement or left hanging in hip clamps.

Other problems

Animals are vulnerable to many diseases after a flood event. These include clostridial diseases such as blackleg, leptospirosis, respiratory diseases and infections due to cuts and loss of integrity of skin and hooves due to prolonged exposure to standing water or wet conditions. Vaccination for clostridial diseases, leptospirosis and respiratory diseases will help to protect animals when stressed and exposed to pathogens.

Infrastructure

Try to re-establish the milking routine, as soon as possible after the event.

Stock containment is important so check/reposition electric fences and prioritise boundary fences.

Consider how best to use paid contractors or any local offers for help – clearing debris and essential repairs will likely need to be done promptly to minimise business disruption.

Check water supply and if there has been any damage to pumps or contamination of home or dairy water supply.

Check drains to see if they are clear.

Capital

Source immediate supplies of feed and animal health products.

Use your phone or digital cameras to take photos of any damage and/or water levels for insurance claims and to help your future planning.

Contact your bank, landlord and business partners to let them know what has happened.

TIMELINE FROM A FLOOD EVENT

First few days

- Stay alive – look after family, stock and neighbours.
- Get cows milked and fed.
- Check water supply and system for any damage or contamination.
- Clean up house and care for family and neighbours.

Next week

- Assess damage to access, fences, pastures and crops (type and depth of silt).
- Talk to bank manager and other resource providers.
- Accept help.

Prioritise actions

- Access to farm
- Water system
- Start on repairing fences
- Feed plan.

Feed plan

- Plan feed requirements/supplies given pasture and crop damage.
- Reduce stock numbers, consider drying off some stock, get rid of culls.
- Develop feedbase regeneration strategy that meets short and long feed goals.
- Develop fertiliser strategy.
- Call contractor, order seed.

Over next 6–8 weeks

- Implement feedbase regeneration strategy.
- Continue repair of infrastructure.
- Document all damage and actions for possible government assistance and for your own records.

