

CASE STUDY

Managing a wool enterprise through drought

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Helen Park is a proud producer of Merino wool. In 2002 at the height of the Millennium Drought, Helen and her business partner bought a 1,200 ha property at Stuart Mill, just south of St Arnaud. Helen moved into the property in 2007 to manage the enterprise by herself. In February 2016 Helen agreed to share her story of how she manages a wool enterprise through dry times.



Maiden ewes, February 2016.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS 2015

- March** Helen says, "In autumn 2015 I was running 2,500 sheep in three mobs as part of a holistic grazing regime. I had planned to put them all back in their age groups at crutching, but decided against stressing pregnant ewes by running them round and round the draft. I just counted them out into lambing mob sizes and let them go as they came out of the shed.
- "Every year I routinely sell off the oldest age group (350 to 420 sheep), but having them all mixed in presented me with an ideal opportunity to class the entire flock.
- April** "When an El Nino year was strongly predicted I drew up my stock reduction plan and decided I would cut back my ewe numbers. I identified the triggers and the action I would take if it became necessary. I knew if the El Nino conditions kicked in I would have to hand feed extensively to get my sheep right through to the next season.
- "My triggers for stock reduction include the condition of my stock, available pasture and forecast rainfall. All decisions are run through the filter of the holistic management framework. It's important to think about possible scenarios and what an ideal response would be ahead of time. It is much better to make these big decisions with a cool head than when under stress.
- May** "Conditions continued to get tougher. I had five mobs in lambing paddocks, with very little feed. I was feeding out barley, as well as lucerne and oaten hay, every day during lambing. And yet many of the ewes simply walked away from their lambs after birth. They were doing it tough.
- September** "When the spring failed it was time to implement the stock reduction plan I had drawn up in April. I decided to take out 600 ewes, and offload the wether weaners.
- "I set my classing parameters, I would keep ewes if - they'd had a lamb, they were good in the wool, they were good in the mouth, and they were in good condition. After classing the flock, I ended up with 596 ewes - close to my target - that would be sold after shearing.



AGRICULTURE VICTORIA

STOCK REDUCTION AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

October "I sold all the woolly wether weaner lambs (about 500) and the rest of the flock was shorn.

November "I sold the 596 ewes but I still had twenty of the old age group ewes left on the farm. They are still here because they met my classing criteria. There were other older ewes that had lambed and were good in the wool, but when I classed them in September they looked like they would struggle through the season, so they had to go. I was left with 1500 ewes, 500 ewe weaners plus the rams.

December "All the ewes were joined and will lamb in early May 2016. I put the maiden ewes (those having their first lamb) into a phalaris paddock I had set aside and they went into green feed that was 15 cm high. I had planned six months earlier to have this paddock available in which to join the maiden ewes. I was pretty amazed to have that amount of feed available in December, but that's the advantage of a grazing system where you move the sheep around in large mobs and can rest some paddocks.

"I pregnancy test between 42 and 60 days after the rams come out of the mating paddock. I don't expect all the ewes to be in lamb, because of the poor season and the fact that conditions were not ideal. Normally they would have good feed available up until Christmas, but by early December they were already doing it harder than they should. I was supplementary feeding to keep their nutrition up to them so they would cycle and ultimately have a lamb.



Helen aims to encourage the spread of native grasses, such as Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) pictured in one of her paddocks.

"Stock reduction is really hard with ewes because you only have a couple of opportunities in a year when you can sell an empty ewe.

"By reducing my ewe numbers it will allow me to run more wethers in the future. I have not ruled out the possibility of further reducing my ewe numbers and keeping wethers in the future because they provide me with what I call 'wriggle room'. If I've got to get rid of some sheep, wethers can be on a truck within a week.

"I did not get the best money for the 500 wethers I sold in October, but I am a bit philosophical and think that sometimes their value lies in their absence. I wasn't feeding them, I wasn't having to cart water to them, they were not costing me any money, and also it was not going to be economic for me to lift them to a really good price.

SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING

"Soon after shearing I started feeding barley to some of the ewes depending on the quality of the feed in the paddock they went into.

"I work out how many grams of grain I want each ewe to have. Initially I feed them about 100 grams of grain per head so that their gut gets accustomed to it. Otherwise the grain can upset them and pass straight through or cause other problems such as acidosis. I start slowly and then build it up.

"I have to calibrate the grain feeder. I'm lucky because mine feeds out at about one kilogram per second, so it makes the sums easy. Once I know how many sheep are in the mob and how many grams they are going to get per head, I can work out how many minutes I have to feed for.

"It depends on the grain too. For example, bearded barley grains tend to stick together and not flow as readily. I have to make sure that I am not overfeeding or underfeeding because that can be bad either way.

"I've ordered another truckload of oaten hay and a truckload of lucerne hay. That should get me through to spring 2016. I don't expect to be feeding out all that hay. If it gets so bad that all the hay has to go out, then I will be selling a whole lot more sheep. Having hay and grain in store is like having money in the bank.

ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT

"Now we are in February, the sheep are in both large and small mobs. The maiden ewes are on their own, and I've split the balance of the older ewes into heavy and light – based on condition score – for ease of feed management. The ewe weaners are on their own, and the rams are in a different paddock again. They are holding their condition well.

"Depending on the outcome of the scanning I will put the empty ewes [those not in lamb] out with the heavies, because they will have a lower nutritional requirement. I keep the empties for their wool. Any more than five per cent empties will be sold.

"Being a wool producing enterprise I would not consider rejoining the empty ewes in this season. I like to keep the ages of the sheep uniform.

"If I ran a cross-bred enterprise I might consider putting the empty ewes back in with the rams.

BUSINESS GOALS AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

"I am introducing the polling influence [polled sheep have no horns] into my sheep as I want a more robust sheep with a larger frame. My aim is to breed a large framed, plain-bodied sheep, growing a deeply crimped, long stapled fleece.

"The last two years I have sold around 75 bales (16.8 micron average) each year through the auction and achieved a good result. When the payment for the wool goes into the bank I think 'yes I, can live to fight another day.'

"I believe strongly there is always something we can learn. I went to the VFF Livestock Group's event on livestock health and nutrition held in the St Arnaud Sporting Club on 14 January. It was a good night. They put on a free feed and more than 100 people turned up.

"The event didn't change my views on management but probably reaffirmed that I was on the right track. I was reminded to look out for acidosis when feeding grain to sheep, and to be mindful of water quality.

WATER CARTING

"I started carting water before Christmas because I had sheep in paddocks at that time that did not have water. I have a 2,000 litre fire truck that I use to shift water around the property to supply a collection of poly tanks and troughs. I have learnt that it is important to site the troughs on a stable soil type or a pad. The increased traffic in a localised area on the lighter soils makes the soil prone to erosion.

KANGAROOS

"Kangaroos are a huge problem, particularly during a drought. I have a permit to cull 90 kangaroos, but even if I filled my quota it would make little difference to the impact the large mobs are having on my farm.

PERSONAL WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

"I have experienced a lot of adversity in my life. Such adversity either makes you stronger or you succumb to it. For me personally it is strength from adversity. The priority must be to look after yourself. Get adequate exercise, watch your alcohol intake, eat well, and get enough sleep.

"I have three great working dogs – Spook, Ringer and Dixie – that I walk for half an hour each morning. I also sometimes take what I call a '15 minute holiday'. I go into St Arnaud and have a coffee and read a magazine. Or I will meet a friend for coffee and 15 minutes becomes a half hour. But it gets me off the farm for a break.

"I also volunteer one day a week with riding for the disabled in Maryborough. It gives me perspective. I might be leading a horse carrying a child who can hardly hold themselves upright and it reminds me that I have nothing to complain about.

"It is also important to me that I do the best I can. I go to bed each night telling myself that during the day I have done the very best I can to care for all my animals and after a good night's sleep I will get up and do it all again.

"It's February of a drought and I feel like I'm thriving. The solution to all my problems is very simple. Just add water. Bring on the autumn break. And sooner rather than later."



Helen and 11 yo Ringer in greener times

For information on drought support call 136 186 or visit www.agriculture.vic.gov.au/drought

For a copy of the guide 'Drought feeding and management of sheep' go to:

<http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/farm-management/drought-preparedness/managing-resources-in-drought>