

Livestock Alert



With the current extended dry conditions and, for some, exceptional summer rains now is the time to remember a few livestock hazards that could cause serious health issues for sheep and cattle.

Toxicity from forage brassicas

Brassica crops are a fast growing and high value forage when the conditions are right. During periods of water stress, rapid plant growth, morning dews etc brassicas can have the right conditions for nitrate poisoning. If you are unfamiliar with the adverse effects of brassicas check the NSW DPI publication "[Forage brassicas – quality crops for livestock production](#)" on grazing brassicas, possible animal health issues and preventative strategies.

Safe strategies will include extended introduction to brassica crops, access to grass pastures, and limited exposure to forage crops in the initial grazing period.

Brassica crops contain thiocyanates that can interfere with iodine metabolism. This is a significant issue for pregnant animals grazing these feeds for extended periods. With feed in short supply brassica feeds may constitute a greater proportion of the animal's diet for longer than normally planned. Consider having run-off areas, or supplementary feeds to provide a balanced diet, and reduce the risk of offspring with goitre or higher incidence of mortalities.

Rye grass staggers

Staggers can happen at any time of the year. However, it's more likely in late summer and autumn when pastures are grazed low and the conditions favour the production of toxins. If your pastures produce rye-grass staggers, even only on occasional years, its time to consider your grazing options. This year may well be a staggers year.

Sheep, cattle, horses, deer and alpaca are all affected. Less obvious signs may include ill-thrift, especially in young stock, heat stress, scouring, reduced fertility and lowered milk production, which all contribute to production losses and animal welfare concerns even when staggers are not seen. Hay and silage from affected pastures can also cause staggers.

Recovery occurs over 1 to 4 weeks once animals are removed from toxic pastures. A number of options exist to manage the disease in the meantime. See the Victorian DPI publication "[Perennial Ryegrass Toxicosis](#)" for livestock and pasture management options.

Confinement feeding

The abundant rain in late January has seen many dry paddocks bloom into green again. The temptation is to let the sheep out of the confinement paddocks and stop grain feeding. There would be the perception of saving money and sheep will be grazing quality green feed.

However, it's going to take more than 6 weeks before the feed is at a leaf stage to be grazed

sustainably. Graze too early and the pasture won't survive and sheep will get very little nutrition from the green. They are likely to show obvious signs of feed scours.

Check in the AWI publication "[Managing Sheep in Droughtlots](#)" on how to wind down the containment feeding, safely.

Worms

Internal parasites are an issue for livestock producers at all times. The parasites, both worms and liver flukes, become more troublesome in extreme conditions as animals become less where they graze and drink.

The Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA) and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) fund a web site providing information on worms, lice and flies that affect sheep. The site also provides a report on the current worm status for each State.

See <http://www.paraboss.com.au> for parasite information, including treatment, management strategies and options.

Water Quality

In extreme dry times water quality is often a silent killer, either because there is inadequate supplies, or more commonly what water is available is unsuitable for stock.

Stock with access to limited water supplies, especially dams quickly contaminated with faeces and water. Shrinking water sources are also subject to increasing in temperature, stagnation and nutrient concentration which can result in toxic algal blooms. Dissolved salts in the water can increase to levels that are unpalatable.

Young, pregnant and old animals are less able to tolerate poor water quality and walking long distances to find drinking water.

For water requirements, salinity levels and other water issues concerning animals see NSW "[Water requirements for Sheep and Cattle](#)" Primefact 326 or Agriculture Victoria "[Water Quality for Farm Water Supplies](#)".

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