

Survival of livestock during the drought

By Prof. HO de Waal

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The seasons have turned, but before Christmas 2016 large parts of South Africa finds itself in the grip of a devastating drought - the worst this animal scientist has seen in four decades. Papers are quoting farmers "Drought is so bad, even the termites have moved away."



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This message is aimed specifically at what farmers could do now:

- Forecasts suggest that good rains which can bring relief may only be expected in January or even February 2017. In the meantime, livestock, especially thin cattle that have thus far endured the drought conditions (feed shortages), are pining away. In desperation, farmers had to stretch the limited feed sources by slaughtering many of their breeding females.
- The scant green growth after small rain showers did not help much, especially in conditions of severe feed shortages. The new growth rapidly produced seeds and relatively little feed of substance – leafy grass tufts are scarce in the veld.

- Energy is wasted by livestock in search of new green growth and the intake of juicy material with its high water content loosens the intestines with typical wet dung. The rapid movement of small quantities of juicy green plant material through the digestive tract of ruminants are detrimental under these conditions.

- Animals must have access to hay in the long form (not ground) – dry grass which can still be cut along roads or elsewhere, wheat straw/crop residues and even common reed ("fluitjiesriet") will do. The aim is to slow down the speed at which the feed sources are moving through the rumen and thus improve the chances of survival.
- Remember feed pellets (and please, not feed pills) are good but relatively expensive feed sources. When feed pellets are given ad libitum it is mostly considered to be a complete diet. When expensive feed pellets are used as a supplementary feed source during drought, the livestock must be rationed – it is not necessary to feed livestock ad libitum for survival.

Under these conditions, it is important to provide livestock additionally with low-quality roughage. Remember, good quality roughage is ground relatively fine to process the feed pellets in the factories. The finer roughage requires less rumination by the animals and as a result, the speed at which the feed pellets move through the rumen and digestive tract is considerably faster. As a consequence utilisation of the feed (digestion – shorter exposure time of fibre to fermentation by the microbes in the rumen) is also less effective.

- Good shelter and shade against the heat, as well a clean drinking water goes without saying.
- On many farms, these suggestions may simply not be possible or practical anymore. However, manage judiciously to limit the damage to both veld and livestock over the short and longer term.
- Most financial resources are under pressure or have been depleted. However, still try to manage and maintain cash flow judiciously or arrange meaningful financing to strategically maintain the necessary activities.

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