



Managing for drought conditions in the Wheatbelt

What is drought resilience?

Sarah Mason defines drought resilience as “having the intellectual, physical, emotional, and financial resources to be able to plan and continue in business through a dry period.”

Sarah understands the need to be prepared for those times of drought, knowing that the climate is cyclical, and the fact that we live in a drying part of the world.

Since taking part in several Resource Consulting Services (RCS) workshops and the Future Drought Fund (FDF) South West WA Hub farmer survey and discussion with the Hub Node, Sarah & Geoff Mason have improved their knowledge and understanding of drought resilience farm practices such as retaining groundcover, capturing water in their landscape, and looking after their livestock’s welfare as best they can through low-stress stockmanship.

Challenges and practice changes

The Mason’s farm goal is to “create a more resilient and sustainable farm.”

Sarah wants to explore more ground covers and their benefits to promote better soil health and increase the water-holding capacity of their land.

Water is the major limiting factor for their property, Carrah. There is one small freshwater soak, however this can be drained within a month during the summer by just one mob of sheep.

Though Carrah is situated at the top of the catchment, there are salinity issues on-farm and due to the laterite soil, the building of new dams has not worked.

Sarah & Geoff both really enjoyed Dr Judy Earl’s presentation regarding grazing management at last years Regenerative Agriculture Conference in Margaret River.

The South West Regional Node Lead is engaged through the South West NRM and supported by the South-West WA Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub, through funding from the Australian Government’s Future Drought Fund.

Quick Snapshot

Farmer: Sarah & Geoff Mason

Farm: Carrah, 660ha

Location: Victoria Plains

Enterprise: Beef cattle

2023 rainfall: 383ml

Soil: laterite gravel (loamy and sandy duplex)



They also hosted a Low-Stress Stock Handling workshop on their property with Bruce Maynard, one of Australia’s leading agricultural innovators.

Since these events, the Masons have changed their grazing management practices and feel it is working for their business, “wishing they had done it ages ago”.

Changes included strategic rotations and intensive grazing methods to promote groundcover and utilising the cows in stimulating soil microbial activity, the use of treat lure tubs (Figure 1) and a mineral cart (Figure 2).

Sarah has since implemented a mix of molasses, dunder, seaweed, hay, and lupins to entice the cows into the yards and different paddocks, all the while creating a low-stress environment for both the cattle and the humans.

“It once took me 7 hours to get 47 cattle through the yards!” exclaimed Sarah.

Further improvements to their management include fencing off areas and protect the local waterways and sources from cattle, and the purchasing of more appropriate fodder shrubs (saltbush).

The Masons provide the cattle with a variety of products including salt, dolomite, gypsum, bentonite, sulphur, and phosphorus in the mineral cart. This method adoption has refined their supplemental feed regime to satisfy the cow’s nutrient needs in a cost-effective way, resulting in increased resilience to tougher times during the dry season.



Figure 1. A treat tub has been used to lure the cattle into a paddock.



Figure 2. Cattle selecting different minerals and supplements in accordance with their needs.

Impact

Through various recommendations and communications from RCS, the SWWA Drought Hub, Perth NRM and RegenWA, the Masons have improved their knowledge and skills in relation to managing for drought conditions. For example, Sarah has implemented crash grazing and the use of mobile fencing to regularly move the cattle around the property allowing their groundcovers to recover and flourish.

After the incredibly dry 2023/24 summer, Sarah’s groundcover remains in place. “Sarah’s groundcovers are significantly better than the district’s average and should be envied” Perth NRM Farm Auditor said in May, 2024.

This groundcover retention means that the Mason’s farm has retained soil moisture, maintained sward diversity and all the benefits that it provides compared to their neighbours.

They are seeing more biodiversity on their farm and a decrease in soil compaction. Sarah stated that “last year I had to use a mallet to bash in posts, now I rarely have to do so!” They’ve seen more Blue Banded Bees and Cuckoo Wasps, which motivates them to keep doing what they’re doing.

Unfortunately, water infiltration continues to be one of the Masons’ main issues on their farm, however as good stewardships of the land, Sarah & Geoff continue refining their management to address the complexities and changes within their low-input system.

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