Culling and production
priorities
Many farmers facing challenging
conditions and higher feed costs
may consider culling a proportion
of their herd to improve short-term
cash flow and control input costs.
While a well-planned culling strategy
can improve the bottom line, animal
health and welfare implications must
be considered alongside your farm
business goals.

Use a three-step strategy to select
cows to cull during drought:

1. Determine the number of cows you
can feed based on your inventories
and availability. Consider sitting
down with a consultant and
using Dairy Australia’s online feed
budgeting tools and resources.

2. Rank cows according to pregnancy
status, stage of lactation,
age, current milk yield, health,
temperament, somatic cell count
and previous bouts of mastitis.

3. Begin working from the bottom of
the list and cull cows until you reach
a sustainable herd size.

When culling more stock than usual,
consider the long-term implications
on your herd and production.

Generally, cows will be sold on a
reduced market and restocking could
be difficult once conditions improve.
Your decisions must be flexible,
reassessed routinely and adjusted as
circumstances change.

Selecting animals to cull
The level of destocking to undertake
will differ from farm to farm.
Underfeeding, particularly fresh
lactating cows, negatively affects
body condition, production, health
and reproduction. Dry cows off early
and destock more heavily to reduce
feed demands and allow better
nutrition for more responsive animals.
As a guideline, the destocking list
could include the following livestock:

› Non-pregnant cows, especially
aged 5 years or over and difficult
to get pregnant.

› Cows with elevated somatic
cell counts or with more than
one bout of mastitis during the
current lactation.

› Cows with high cell counts for
two lactations even after dry cow
treatment during last dry period.

› Slow milkers or cows whose
temperament prolongs milking
time or impedes flow in the dairy.

Key messages
Destocking is based on feed
cost and availability —
monitor milk price versus
cost of feed per litre

If destocking, urgently
identify the number and
class of animals to be fed
or sold

Sell cull cows early to
reduce production costs

Cull poor performing
cows first

Keep the best genetics
in the herd for as long
as possible

Observe any medicine
and antibiotic meat
withholding periods

Destocking has long-term
impacts on business
profitability and ability to
rebound, and should be
carefully considered –
seek advice from your
accountant, bank manager
and farm advisers
› Low producers and cows in poor health and body condition.

› Heavily culling heifers and calves will reduce the feed requirements for the herd, allowing the scarce remaining feed to go toward lactating cows that will return income. This should be considered carefully, especially if also heavily culling the milking herd. Low replacement numbers will negatively affect the genetic progress and the fertility of your herd (younger animals are more fertile) and may be expensive to buy in in the future. Having enough heifers coming through will affect your business’s ability to rebuild production in future seasons.

› Herd bulls that can be replaced when needed.

› Other livestock that do not contribute directly to cash flow

**Animal welfare**

Livestock management, stocking rates and nutrition are closely linked to animal health and welfare. Consider the best ways to adjust stocking rates and manage feed supplies for livestock.

During a drought, tough decisions need to be made and producers who have drought-affected stock should consider whether all decisions are humane and reasonable. Delaying destocking can seem reasonable but result in fewer options for selling into the market. Act early while stock are fit and strong.

If stock are suffering, take action immediately by feeding or agisting the stock. Where cash flow prevents taking action, animals must be sent for slaughter or humanely destroyed if they cannot be transported.

Animals that are sick, injured, severely lame, blind, heavily pregnant, weak or emaciated should not be transported. For a complete understanding of the standards for the transportation of livestock, visit:


**Meat withholding periods**

Develop a culling plan that considers animals treated with medicines or antibiotics prior to being sold for slaughter. Specific meat residue withholding periods are based on dosage and route of administration of the drug used, and appear on the label. If you are unsure what period should be observed following treatment of an animal with a registered drug, consult your vet, particularly if the drug has been used off-label.