



# SHEEP SHEET

by Dr. Lyle G. McNeal, Executive Director,  
NSP; Sheep & Wool Specialist;  
Copyright©

♻️ printed on recycled paper

## Planning for drought

Consideration of the occurrence of drought most likely is the major short- and long-term planning deficiency for most western livestock producers, because the bulk of feed consumed by range sheep and cattle consists of forages produced on either native or improved ranges. The quantity of the forage depends on many uncontrolled physiological conditions of which one of the most limiting in the arid and semi-arid West is moisture. The presence or absence of drought almost invariably determines whether a livestock producer has a good or poor income year.

Thus, drought management decisions are internalized informally in the mind of the livestock producers. Common sense dictates most of the day-to-day short run decisions, however, the long term decisions are rarely if ever considered by livestock producers, generally speaking.

Stockpiling feed for a drought may not be the most economic strategy, depending on the individual producer's ranch and feed situation. If possible having enough stored feed and grazing alternatives for one year is recommended. However, it would be far better to have two years stored, if feasible. Native hays tend to store better than legume hays (alfalfa, clover, pea, vetch and others) although both lose quality rapidly, unless hay preservatives have been added. After two years of storage, hays lose most of their important nutritional value.

A flexible flock (or herd) adjustment program could be developed based on the variability of moisture conditions. A system developed in the midwest is based on five (5) moisture conditions with adjustments made internally within each condition. See figure 1.

## Planning for Drought

### Sheepdex G-2

Figure 1: A flexible flock or herd adjustment plan based on moisture levels

**1. Moisture much below normal:**

**Action** - Cull closely by selling all light weight lambs (60 lbs. or less) or calves (400 lbs. or less), use feed reserves, and then start liquidating breeding herd as necessary.

**2. Moisture below normal:**

**Action** - Replace cull ewes or cull cows with yearling ewes or heifers, use reserve feed, and sell lambs (80 lbs. or less) and calves (500 lbs. or less) at heavier weights than condition #1 above.

**3. Moisture normal:**

**Action** - Replace cull ewes or cull cows, sell half the lambs (80+ lbs.) or calves (500+ lbs.) at heavier weights than condition #2 above, and consider feeding the other half.

**4. Moisture above normal:**

**Action** - Replace cull ewes or cull cows, feed lambs (110+ lbs.) or calves (600+ lbs.) to heavier weights than condition #3 above, and build feed reserves.

**5. Moisture exceptional:**

**Action** - Replace cull ewes and rams or cull cows and bulls, buy additional livestock, build up financial and feed reserves, and feed all lambs (110+ lbs.) and calves (600+ lbs.) to heavier weights than condition #4 above.

**Note:** The above plan is only applicable to livestock producing areas that customarily have land with sufficient cropland to provide most if not all of their own feed reserves. The key with this suggested plan is "**flexibility**" within each particular livestock operation.



For more information write The Navajo Sheep Project, Inc. PO Box 4454, Logan, UT 84323-4454. The Navajo Sheep Project is a registered non-profit Utah corporation.