



Drought Survival Stories 2



as told by Queensland
sheep and wool producers

Leading the way

for a more profitable Queensland
sheep and wool industry through

new technologies

knowledge and skills



Queensland Government
Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries

australian wool
innovation
• limited

This e-book is an initiative of the Leading Sheep Central West regional committee and contains stories written by producers, or compiled from their ideas and thoughts. The drought book idea was conceived by producer Jan Taylor, the contents collated by Jenny Keogh, proof-read by Nicole Sallur, and published by Jane Milburn. Photos provided by producers.

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A buster's perspective

By Sally Cripps, Melrose, Blackall

Mother Nature isn't someone you can argue with. But that doesn't mean I was going to lie down and let her walk all over me either, in 2002/03 and again in 2004/05. I choose to think that's because I come from the generation known as the Baby Busters.

Born between 1958 and 1968, we were too young for the Boomers' "free love" and too old for Generation X's grunge era. No, we were the ones focused on a career, creating the dotcom boom, giving new meaning to the word 'entrepreneur', living through Reaganomics, becoming the most taxed and most regulated generation in history. Is it any wonder I approached coping with drought in a business-like way?

To be serious, we thought we were prepared for drought at Melrose. Looking back to my Christmas newsletter of 1992, I talk about "feed all black, dams all dry (no more worries about bogged sheep anyway), and we ran out of river water for the garden today". Doesn't sound too different to the scene just a few years ago. Why then does the latter scenario have such potential, still, to totally drain and exhaust me just thinking about it? Is coping with drought like



giving birth – the pain fades from your memory after a while? Does being physically youthful help with your outlook? Perhaps there's a bit of truth in all these suggestions, but the most obvious difference was that our struggle in 1992/93 was localised whereas in 2002/03, there was no relief anywhere.

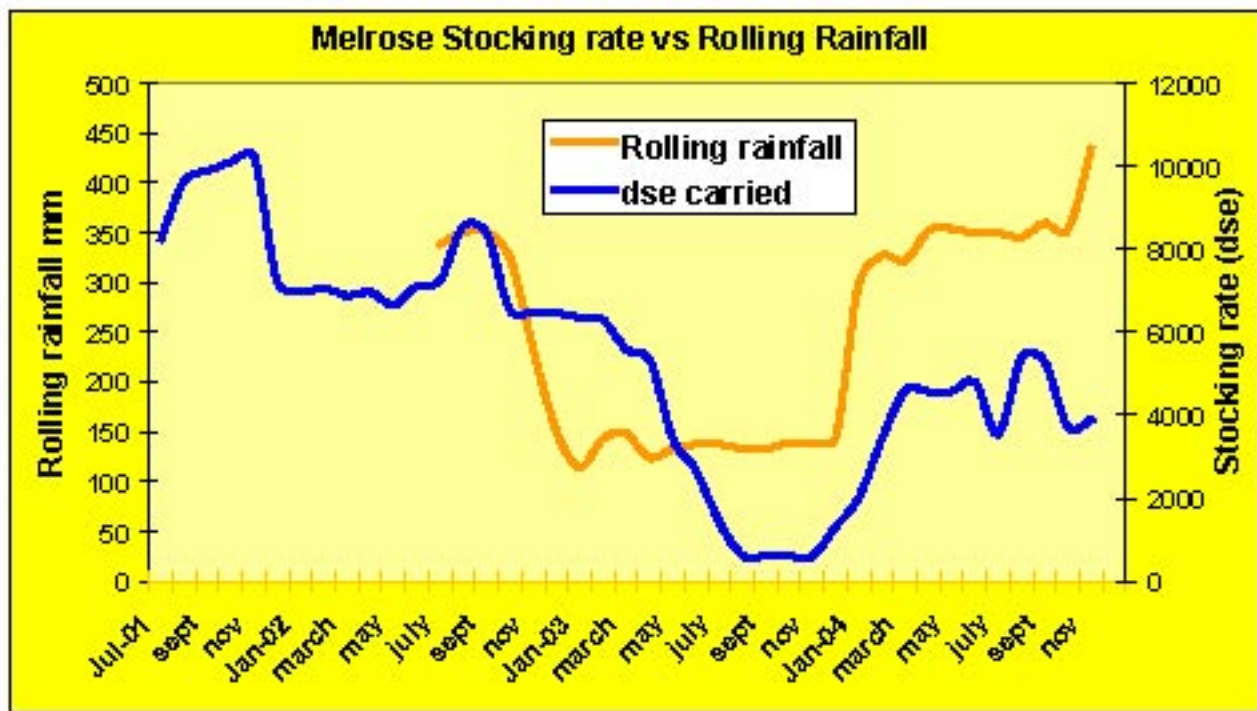
In the 1990s we were able to agist our breeding nucleus on a shire reserve, making management easy and lessening the scars on our country. This time there was nowhere to go. We cut all the leopardwood scrub we could before it started losing leaves of its own accord.

Neither Bill nor I had fed sheep on a large scale before, so we were lulled into thinking, at the start, that lick blocks would be a good enough supplement for lambing ewes, with a bit of dry feed around. They just walked away

from their lambs. Seeing that, we needed to think smarter about feed strategies. The realisation that whatever strategy we chose, we could be stuck with for months, was a bit of a wakeup call.

Bill will tell his story about the day-to-day feeding regime we employed, (page 8) but I want to outline my techniques for coping with disaster. I guess my philosophy is to look for the positives in all situations. What is the point of making it out the other side of such an awful period without learning anything is what I ask myself. While many tried to ignore what the drought was doing to their bottom line (and I understand how necessary this can be for mental health), I took the opposite tack and scrutinised it to death.

Bill and I kept up our Bestprac Profit Probes, I began a 'grass budgeting'



chart, and I took regular photographs of the paddocks. How did this help me? I think the full value of doing the probes will come next time we suffer in the same way, by giving us the knowledge that we were able to muster the resources to get through it earlier. And if you know something intimately it loses some of its power to frighten you.

The probes also made us examine the choices we'd made, from month-to-month and then from year-to-year, and see which ones had been 'profitable' (or showed less loss) and which ones hadn't. It's not easy to make big decisions in the middle of a raging drought. You question your judgment, knowing how crucial it is. We found some peace of mind by having a few statistics at our fingertips.

To describe the recording I did, as grass budgeting

is a heck of a misnomer! There wasn't much grass to allocate! Once again, it was more of a record.

I kept track of rainfall, or lack of, and the amount of stock. Bill was seeing the sheep every day while he was out feeding and found he lost a sense of perspective. He felt like he'd been doing it forever. The chart (above) helped us to see that there were little variations in our management month-by-month, and that we could still have an influence on the direction of those lines! And it was a great visual tool, which shouldn't be underestimated.

I value-added to the chart by going to the same spot in a particular paddock on the first of each month and taking a photograph. I tried to take it at the same time of day for consistency, and I found that late afternoon shadows made everything look far more

haggard than they needed to be. I'd then paste the picture on to the chart in the office, in the working space for that month. As you can see from the photo story I've compiled, (page 7) the photos were absolutely invaluable. Memory is very selective, I've found.

In Spring 2004, Bill and I were having a healthy debate about the state of the country and I found the photographs I'd taken to be very useful in supporting my point of view! They are a good referral point when you are asking the questions – will grass ever grow back from this? How long might it take the pasture to regenerate? Did the old butts come back or was there new growth? What did the country look like when we decided to start feeding last time? And so on. The other good thing about taking photographs was that it got me out into

What was the issue: Cattle running out of feed late 2002	
Your actions/what you did?	How well did it work?
Fed blocks and cut Leopardwood	well
What would you do next time?	How did you feel?
Sell more cattle earlier	Tired and broke, anxious for it to end

What was the issue: Still dry in March 2003	
Your actions/what you did?	How well did it work?
Sell all dry cattle down to 3 months of age	History judged us favourably
What would you do next time?	How did you feel?
Probably the same, get big mouths off first	Pleased they were gone, kept cash flow going

What was the issue: Still dry in June 2003 - sheep prices rising	
Your actions/what you did?	How well did it work?
Consulted nutritionist for advice on keeping remaining 2100 ewes alive	Fan-bloody-tastic
Purchased Wombat feeder, purchased sorghum and started substitution feeding	
What would you do next time?	How did you feel?
The same	Good to be doing something

the paddock once a month. As you'll see from reading Bill's story (page 8), feeding became a relatively straightforward one-person operation (but still tedious) once we'd invested in a Wombat mixer, so it was easy for me to lock myself away from the ravages of the drought.

Taking the photos made me go out and face it. And because I'd had a break between each visit I could see things that had crept up on Bill. In hindsight I would say this was one of our best drought management strategies, and we didn't know it at the time. Bill always valued my 'fresh' eyes.

Before I leave the subject of the photos, I'd just like to apologise to readers for getting slack and not taking any last year after the winter rain, or this April after 192 mm (eight inches) fell in a cloudburst – that would have been a real visual feast!

The other recording activity I did (yes, I know, I spend a lot of time in the office) was to note down the important decisions we took and the reasons for doing so. The table, above, is a sample of what I recorded. Some of these columns couldn't be filled in until long after the event, and we gained a lot of benefit from going back and evaluating our actions.

We went through the same sort of process when we had some rain, to consider how we went with our decisions. These decisions included: to go into short-term trading to build up cashflow and numbers; to diversify into the meat sheep business and start up a South African Meat Merino (SAMM) stud; and to build up off-farm investments – things involving a measure of risk for us. If you can pinpoint where you went wrong, or what you did right, or how much stress is too much,

then you've got yourself a headstart for next time.

Finally, back to my Buster-theory (not a drought-busting one, the one about personalities). Our Bestprac group was invaluable, giving us a forum for debate, a source of support and people who could find something funny in every situation. We Baby Busters are good at social linkages and I think every drought needs our skills. Keeping society ticking along helps the feeling that not all is lost with our world. I ignored most advice to 'look after me' and felt a lot better for it.

Getting stuck into hard educational issues and reviving a community newspaper made me feel that I was doing something that would pay off for all of us, my family and I included, in the long run. We are all different but this worked for me. And it took my mind off the weather.



August 2003



February 2004



December 2004



November 2003



March 2004



March 2005



January 2004



September 2004



September 2006

Wombat success story

By Bill Cripps, Melrose, Blackall

Looking at the last five years, I wonder – are we ever out of drought or do we just go from dry spell to dry spell?

Our latest experience of this started in Spring 2001 when we ended the year in a big protein drought. We fed dry lick to sheep and cattle. The cattle did well but we lost most of what could have been a good lambing. It was dry all through 2002 and we did not join our ewes.

We had no plan for drought management and it was not a very good year financially or mentally.

A failed summer wet season was the story for 2003 and so we started selling cattle, two decks a month until they were all gone by June. By July, we had sold all the dry sheep except for 2200 ewes which we were feeding.

We had invested in a Wombat mixer and used Phil Kemp as our nutrition adviser. We fed sorghum and by adding urea, molasses, bentonite and lime, had a feed with 21 percent protein for half the cost of cottonseed or lupins at that time.

In 2004 we had 168 mm (seven inches) of rain in January, which allowed us to start sheep trading until June. We started feeding



cottonseed to ewes and lambs in October of that year. It would have been a very ordinary year in 2005 except for 144 mm (six inches) of rain in May-June.

We still ended up feeding cottonseed to our stock during the summer of 2005/06. Since then we

have been travelling OK, but it looks like another protein drought is on the way.

The experience gleaned during 2002/03 has taught us to keep as much ground cover as possible, by selling stock to match available feed, and to make the most of grass



in good times by trading sheep and cattle. It's important to keep stock in good order to be able to keep the option of selling and trucking open, as dictated by prices.

Our experience of using a Wombat mixer to feed breeder ewes and their progeny, if dry matter is available in the paddocks, was a good one. The Wombat is a simple mixer of feed that doubles as a feed-out wagon.

It's basically a mixing bowl on wheels with an auger that moves around the side of the bowl, driven by a big universal joint at the bottom, and powered by a 5 hp petrol motor.

By calculating the weight of the grain that was held in the bucket of my tractor, it was an easy process to mix a variety of feeds accurately to sheep.

By timing how long it took to empty an amount of feed on the ground it was very easy to give each animal its daily ration. Up to one tonne could be fed out at a time.

By mixing lower quality cheaper grain like sorghum and adding other ingredients, it was possible to jazz feed up to 20 percent protein and 13 percent energy.

Other positive aspects to the Wombat is that it is

a one-man operation so Distance Education lessons weren't often disrupted. It's safe in that you don't have to stand in the back of a moving vehicle not being steered by anyone to shovel out feed.

We expect the Wombat to feature in our stock management program in most years now.

At the time of writing, our ewes are lambing and we are heading for a protein drought again. When 250 head of agistment cattle go in October we shall feed leftover cottonseed to the ewes and lambs until it rains and the lambs are saleable.

No right, wrong way

By Helen and Michael Meppem, Tamar, Isisford

This drought (2001-2006) was the worst we have seen in the 30 years that our family has owned Tamar.

Our strategies were different to many in that we run several properties in a family business and stock both cattle and sheep. For us the fact of owning more land where you can spread the stock out over different blocks has helped especially in this drought so far. All the blocks are in the Isisford/Yaraka area.

As far as the sheep side of the business goes, we managed on what grass was available until 2002 when we put out lick blocks for many of the sheep. At this time, the grass had lost its value and coverage. We also fed out oats to the ewes and lambs and the rams were fed hay and oats.

All our cattle were sent away on agistment in 2003 so the sheep were left to manage with the little feed that was left. Being great foragers, we had low stock losses here at Tamar.

Many of our dams ran dry in 2003, although we still had the bore drain as permanent water. Many of our stock were sold to lighten our numbers in order to keep our breeding stock going.



Early in 2004 we received excellent rain. Unfortunately it all fell in a few days and then no more to speak of for the rest of the year. This rain helped for quite a while but mostly produced herbage and not much grass. It did give us water which we desperately needed. No supplements were put out for the stock in 2004, but things were again getting desperate by about November that year.

By 2005 we were in desperate straights again and this time had no option but to feed everything as best we could and hope the drought would not go on forever. We did not send our cattle away this time. Instead we fed cattle as well as sheep mostly with hay of every sort, including barley, sorghum, lucerne, peanut, and Mitchell grass hay. Oats was again fed out to the ewes and lambs.

During the drought we have had very low lambing percentages, probably due to the fact that the stock were not getting the nutrients needed to cycle and lamb. We were in survival mode not production mode.

Many of the lambs born were probably left by their mothers due to the dry as well. Pigs and eagles would have done a lot of damage with the weak stock as well, especially any lambs. Even the kangaroos, although there was still a number of them, became very weak and were dying around all the buildings.

By shearing time (June/July) our sheep stock were very weak, but we were lucky enough to receive welcome relief rain and on some of our country (not Tamar) up to 100 mm (four inches). This meant the cattle could all be

shifted to those areas and the rain that fell on Tamar was enough to carry on the sheep for the rest of 2005 – a real blessing. This was the big advantage of owning more country.

Again, we came to the dreaded summer and again it was a dry, unbelievably hot and long summer of 2005-2006. All summer long we waited for the much-needed rain, but every day we woke up and it was the same, with not a rain cloud around.

By March 2006 it was again getting to desperate stages and we were thinking of selling off large numbers of stock. However rain did come half way through March, just enough to give us hope and reasonable feed for a while. The grass shot away again and at last the heat was finished.

Easter, in April, was our lucky break though, with 150 mm (six inches) falling at Tamar and once again we had plenty of feed and water.



This rain did give us quite a coverage of Mitchell grass as well, which many people had thought may have died out over the five years. The best Mitchell grass grew on areas where we had had some worthwhile showers earlier.

This has not ended the drought for us all in this area, even though this winter has been a better season. Without good spring and summer rain we

will be back in it again. We will need a couple of good seasons to make us think the drought is over and we are back on track again.

Our sheep numbers are about a third of what we started with. This is partly due to higher cattle prices and low wool prices, so we are holding on to our cattle numbers as much as possible.

I think this drought shows no matter what choices you make in drought times, if the dry goes on over a long period of time, it is a drain on us all mentally, physically and emotionally.

No way is the right or wrong way, it is just what works for you depending on your situation. What amazes me about the men folk is that they always think it will come to an end, whereas the women folk feel very worried it may not!



Reason to continue

By David and Clare Paterson, Kaloola, Isisford

Our family consists of David, Clare and our four children aged between three and 12 years. We live on Kaloola and the adjoining property Arrowfield in the Isisford Shire of central west Queensland.

Our main business enterprises are grazing sheep, cattle and goats on pebbly Mitchell grass downs country with shaded boree trees and patches of gidyea trees.

Our normal annual rainfall of 350mm (14.5 inches) falls mostly in summer. During the past five years our general merino sheep maintenance involves scanning for pregnancy, and rejoining or selling empty ewes as the season deteriorates.

Wethers are sold as hoggets unless the season allows further stocking. We practice rotational grazing with larger mobs of sheep allowing shorter grazing periods.

For three of the four years between 2002 to 2006, we received between 140 mm to 220mm, and had two periods with only 2.5 mm rain falling in 10-month periods.

Good grass cover deteriorated after 2002 and although we had good rain over one week in



February 2004, this was followed by 10 months of no follow-up rain. Since 2001, our drought management consisted of a combination of many different methods – agisting, feeding cottonseed and destocking.

In December 2003, we trucked 4700 ewes and rams to agistment on a barley and wheat stubble paddock 900 kms away.

After three months agistment they were to be sold if we received no rain, but fortunately we were able to bring them home after a break in the season.

This exercise cost \$4.20 per head agistment and \$4.13 per head of freight, totalling \$8.33 for three months with minimal losses.

Ewes returned in good condition in lamb and our country was preserved for that period.

In December 2004, we began feeding all our sheep on cottonseed. The sheep were initially organised in one mob of 5500 ewes and were run in a 1300 hectare paddock with three water points accessible.

This paddock had been unused all year and contained some yellow leaf on the grass and urea supplements were always available. All sheep were joined in early October for six weeks and were shorn from mid-November 2004.

They were aged between two and six years, and averaged a fat score of low two.

Grown ewes were fed a



ration of 110g cottonseed/ per head/ day. The cottonseed averaged out to approximately 4c/head/ day.

Feeding the sheep required both a driver and another person to shovel the cottonseed off the vehicle, taking approximately 3–4 hours every three days.

We shovelled out cottonseed from the vehicle's tray back and trailer onto the dirt road for a distance of approximately three kilometres. We ensured that cottonseed was fed between 200m and 1000m from a water point.

Cottonseed was delivered to the property in 25

tonne deliveries and stored uncovered on an elevated hard gravel ridge with temporary fencing to keep stock and kangaroos out.

Care had to be taken that sheep didn't eat the small cotton plants with two leaves that generated from the seed after rain. Cotton plants more advanced than this posed no problem that we were aware of.

After 15 months, we reached a situation where water was running out, no fibre was available in the paddock and we decided that we could purchase no more cottonseed. De-stocking again began in earnest! Fortunately rain followed in March and April 2006.

Some of the pitfalls of retaining and feeding sheep were the expense, the time involved, the physical effort and commitment of feeding stock on a regular basis.

Income from de-stocking sales was spent on keeping and feeding other sheep and therefore was not available to repurchase stock after the drought.

One negative result of feeding sheep in dry conditions was the contamination of dust in the sheep's wool.

The most positive effect was the friendliness of the stock when they spotted any vehicle in the anticipation of being fed.

Stock were maintained in a good condition which meant they were strong enough to cope with the boggy conditions of our black soil when rain arrived.



We also had the satisfaction of knowing that we were doing the best we could for our stock in the situation. We had a drive and a reason to be busy every day, and eventually when the rain came – we had a core mob of breeders to rebuild from.

Many things helped us through this time. Family and friends were extremely supportive. Keeping company with positive neighbours and friends helped keep life in balance and we supported each other.



Keeping perspective in your life was difficult at times. However the sunset at the end of the day and the over-riding knowledge that this was where we wanted to be in the long-term was always in our mind. We realised that a drought will always end and many people were in a worse situation than ours.

This was a marvellous diversion and gave us a positive, active outlet with friends and family.

the property we paid a caretaker and a neighbour to feed the stock, but it was a very beneficial break and gave us stamina to persevere!

We kept ourselves motivated with other interests. Channelling some efforts into community events gave us company, a shared goal and distraction. As a family we made time to ride our horses at the end of the day and at local horse events such as gymkhanas and polocrosse carnivals.

In the past few months when we were running out of water on the property, we spent an occasional night at a motel in town to get some relief from the dirty green water and worries at home. Having a break such as a short holiday can help you survive the duration. To enable us to get away from

Paid work off farm also gave David some time away, with the income being very welcome.

It was easier for David to work away a few days each week and Clare could keep the family life and schooling uninterrupted,



and of course still feed the stock. This off-farm work was a much-needed break from the worries and grind of work at home with a financial reward at the end of the day.

Regarding any ideas that could offer people more support when suffering droughts, we believe that until one has personally experienced a drought

it is very difficult to comprehend.

Government supports, both federal and state were accessible and appreciated. There is much more awareness and access to drought support and information over the past three years.

In summary, we tried many different approaches

to survive the drought.

In hindsight, the agistment approach was more successful for cattle than with our sheep, and it was an expensive exercise due to the short duration of agistment, long distances and freight costs involved. Feeding cottonseed was reasonably successful as long as we predetermined the maximum duration and therefore financial limit of feeding.

De-stocking was a basis for any drought survival but the timing and degree of successful de-stocking was and always will be clearer with hindsight.

One must try all or any methods to help you last a drought. The main priority is to love where you live and what you do, to persevere through the tough periods until the good seasons return.

Suggestions for future generations

1. Have a contingency plan for the worst. Commit to deadlines and adhere to them.
2. Offload stock before your general area is destocking, to avoid selling stock as prices decrease. Don't hold on to stock unnecessarily. Class your sheep, pregnancy-test ewes and sell off dry ewes, culls, and surplus sheep. For example, if you breed don't hold on to wethers or cast-for-age sheep. Sell weaners and retain the older pregnant ewes. Never regret your stock sales. It is wiser to sell hastily than lose stock.
3. Continue to join your sheep in anticipation of rain.
4. Take pride in the condition of your stock and your property, as they both reflect on the land management as well as the season.

'What if' made easy

John Beattie, Arno, Isisford

story by Jane Milburn

It takes effort to master computer technology but once learned, central west Queensland producer John Beattie says using programs such as Stockplan* to test multiple "what if" scenarios becomes a leisure activity rather than hard work.

From Arno at Isisford, John learned about the StockPlan decision-support tools at an information day in Longreach in 1998 but it wasn't until things got tight in 2001 that he took a closer look.

"The most important thing about going into a bad period is to have a plan to come out at the other end rather than stagnating and getting depressed," John said.

"Stockplan has helped me change my thinking to view drought as an opportunity to plan what might be, to think positively, and that's made a huge difference."

Prior to using this computer-based decision-making tool, John would do his drought planning using a calculator, pencil and paper.

"It is just so easy to make a mistake when you are doing calculations by hand. Instead you can rely on computer-based calculations when you

are aware of how those calculations were put in place and what they have taken into account."

"Computer-based calculations have a background of being credible, so you know that whatever decision you make there would be a credible outcome."

John has used two Stockplan tools, the Drought Pack which assesses the cost of feeding and determines the break-even price for specific classes of animals and the Im Pack which provides the opportunity to assess the impacts of different decisions on the structure of the flock over a 10-year period.

"Drought Pack helps address immediate problems. If you've decided to feed, you can work out how much feed is needed and what it will cost for a season. It also provides the ability to consider sheep nutrition and sheep behaviour information which is relevant to productivity."

This year, Arno had about 144 mm (six inches) of rain that kept stock going over winter but John expects to feed from September to December.

"Im Pack enables you to

do 10-year calculations of how your breeding herd will be impacted by decisions and enables you to project over a 10-year period what would happen under various scenarios. For example, what if we keep going with a wool operation?"

Using Im Pack, John has deduced that he is better off moving to a sheep-breeding operation rather than continue as a wool-growing operation.

"Our program now is to off-load young stock earlier rather than hanging on to them for 2-3 years as you would do with a wether operation as part of a wool-growing business."

"We will keep a nucleus of breeders of sustainable numbers regardless of the season and get rid of our young stock straight away, whereas if you run a wool-growing business you need to retain wethers through the drought by feeding them."

"The seasonal situation in our region also led us to consider another option, which is the need to supplementary feed for several months every year whether we're in drought or not. We only have adequate nutrition for 6-8 months of the year, which means there

are four months when our stock don't have adequate nutrition unless they are fed."

"We've calculated that we can put \$5-6 worth of feed into our sheep each year without impacting at all on our returns, because the feed is paid for by increased production."

On an annual basis as part of his on-farm decision-making, John runs a four-way test of "review, plan, check, do" to see how his operation has gone in the past year and identify where it needs to go based on the current market situation.

"The markets change quickly – there are variations in the wool market, the meat market, alternative forms of grazing such as goats, hybrid merinos, cattle – so you can't just stick to one thing without reviewing all the options."

"We think about what our country will do best, what is sustainable based on historical and current weather patterns and make a decision from there."

"Then we review the process, and that's where Stockplan comes is because it is easy to run the economic "what ifs" between the different options that are available to us."

"It is a battle to keep up with computer and the technology, but it is very satisfying to utilise

the programs it offers in vegetation management, mapping, cash data, accounting and reporting."

"The newest program I've looked at is Woolcheque, set up by Australian Wool Innovation to consider our wool selling options and keep track of trends. It is brilliant."

"I can have a file with my wool specs in it, and update the file with the days' market prices, press a button and it will identify where those prices are relative to 12 months' trading. You can't get any better than that."

John learned about Woolcheque via a teleconference run by AWI and organised by the Leading Sheep project.

* Stockplan is a training program assisted by computer software which offers a suite of decision-support tools that enable sheep and cattle producers to explore management options that minimise the environmental and financial impacts of drought.

It was developed by the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries and Australian Wool Innovation with the aim of helping foster drought preparedness by producers and managing animal production systems before the on-farm situation is irreversible. For more details, contact NSW DPI on 02 4828 6600.

If you are interested in participating in a Stockplan workshop, please contact your Leading Sheep committee via www.leadingssheep.com.au.