



SMALL LANDHOLDER SERIES

## Livestock on Small Landholdings

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An increasing number of people in Western Australia are moving to small landholdings seeking a semi-rural lifestyle, a degree of self-sufficiency or to set up a semi-commercial enterprise. For many, keeping animals is seen to be part of the rural experience. Having an understanding of key issues in relation to animals can avoid serious problems later, not only for the small landholder, but also for nearby commercial agricultural, horticultural and pastoral industries.

Stock in their various forms are an essential part of Western Australia's agriculture. Consequently there are several regulations and rules for keeping stock under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976* that must be complied with, even by small landholders.

Small landholders keep many types of animals, including sheep, horses, cattle, alpacas, goats, pigs, fowls and ostriches. Whichever species is kept, it should be remembered that animals are a responsibility and they are expensive to maintain. It is important for landholders contemplating buying animals to consider their situation carefully before purchase.



Figure 1: Keeping animals means you are responsible for their health and well-being. This takes time and money.

### Important questions

There are some important basic questions that should be discussed with all those who may be involved in the care and maintenance of the animals.

- **Why?:** Why are animals wanted and what will ultimately be done with them? Stock for commercial gain will take considerable time, money and knowledge for optimum or even reasonable production. Their ultimate fate is generally slaughter. Landholders wanting to use stock simply as 'lawnmowers', are strongly advised to consider alternative vegetation for their land or to hire or buy a ride-on mower or slasher – it will be cheaper and easier in the long run.



Figure 2: Keeping a few sheep on a couple of hectares just as 'lawnmowers' is costly and time consuming – a ride-on lawnmower or slasher will prove cheaper and easier.

- **Time:** How much time is available for you to devote to managing the stock, along with any problems that will arise? Most farmers who run stock do so as a full-time job. Stock need to be checked regularly, particularly during summer, and this makes going away for holidays difficult. Owning stock may detract from the relaxing lifestyle you seek.
- **Knowledge and skills:** Each class of livestock requires a specific set of knowledge and skills, such as safe handling, recognition of ill-health and

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provision of appropriate nutrition. Without these, you can soon face problems.

- **Costs:** Running stock costs money. Commercial farmers who make money from stock spend considerable funds on maintenance of their stock and related infrastructure, often for very small percentage returns on their investment. You should be prepared to support stock from your off-farm earnings.

## Specific considerations

If, after considering these questions, you decide that you want to keep animals, there are some specific issues that must be addressed.

- **Capability of the property:** The capability of any property to support grazing stock is determined by various factors such as soil type, rainfall quantity and distribution, topography and so on. These factors determine the stocking rate, which is a guide to the numbers of animals that can be run on a property without causing land degradation.

Shires often have local planning policies that specify maximum (if any) numbers of stock that are allowed on small landholdings, so check with your local shire before buying any stock.

Under the *Soil and Land Conservation Act 1945* landowners can be compelled to remedy land degradation caused by overstocking. Properties that are overstocked are liable to wind erosion, dust problems, water erosion and nutrient runoff. Many of these problems will affect neighbours and can lead to complaints. Visits by authorities will then detract from a relaxed rural lifestyle.

- **Planning the property for stocking:** If stock can be run on the property, you then need to ensure that it is set up to handle the stock efficiently. We strongly recommend that you develop a property plan before acquiring any stock. Information on how to do this is available on the small farm website listed at the end of this Farmnote.

A property plan requires an aerial photograph (preferably recent, in colour and laminated). Using clear plastic overlays and marking pens, you can, over time, map out where your different soil types lie and plot other factors that dictate what types of activities can be done on the property (such as the location of waterlogged areas, rocky ground, and such). With this type of information mapped on the photo, you can then plan the best areas to:

- fence off and establish the best pasture for stock;
- plant windbreaks to give stock shelter; and
- lay reticulation for troughs, and where to site these in relation to the house, sheds, access tracks, and so on.

Such forward planning on the overlays allows you to consider various options before wasting money and effort by putting something in the wrong position.

- **Buying healthy stock:** Whether stock is bought from saleyards, other landholders and neighbours, or through the newspaper, you should try to establish

the vaccination history of the stock. If this is not available, it is best to assume no vaccinations have been given. New animals should be kept separate from other stock for several weeks, with any signs of ill-health being checked by a veterinarian. Keeping animals separate also allows weed seeds passed through the gut to be kept in one area for future eradication. You should also inspect animal coats for weed seeds.

- **Stock regulations:** In Western Australia, the *Stock (Identification and Movement) Act 1970* requires all stock owners to register a brand. This is a combination of two letters and a number, issued upon application to the Registrar of Brands. Sheep, goats and cattle will also be issued an earmark, a combination of two specially shaped notches to be removed from the ear. The branding equipment can then be bought from a branding equipment supplier or through a livestock agent. You must also complete a waybill to accompany certain types of livestock moved off your property. These regulations are intended to control the spread of livestock diseases and may be enforced by stock inspectors and police. For information on particular species see the references at end of this Farmnote.
- **Fencing:** There are different types of fencing for different types of stock, but all fencing, and particularly your boundary fence, must be correctly erected and strong enough to contain stock. You are responsible for keeping all stock on your property. Straying stock can spread or contract diseases, cause damage to other properties and create traffic hazards, for which you may be liable. The keeping of some stock such as deer require a permit and have minimum legal fencing requirements.

Rural fencing companies have informative booklets about both conventional and electric fencing.

- **Weeds:** Some weeds are toxic to particular animals. It is important that you can recognise the weeds on your property and be alert for new weeds brought onto the property by contractors or visitors' vehicles. Under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, you are responsible for controlling declared weeds on your property. Declared weeds are those plants which are considered to be, or have the potential to become, a serious threat.

Chemicals are generally the easiest and most effective method of weed control. Ensure that the correct chemical for the particular weed is used at the correct rate and in the right conditions, with the appropriate safety equipment. Grazing can also be an effective weed control strategy, depending upon the particular weed and type of stock. Once weeds are controlled, it is important to replace them with a quality pasture, rather than leave bare ground, which may allow other weeds to establish.

- **Pasture establishment:** For the health and wellbeing of the animal, it is important to establish a good quality pasture, rather than let the animal graze whatever grows. The South West Land Division of Western Australia is described as having a Mediterranean climate, which typically experiences



*Figure 3: You will need to budget for supplementary stock feeding when there is insufficient pasture.*

hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Annual pasture species such as subterranean clover and ryegrass are shallow rooted and die off at the end of the growing season. The impact of the feet of stock (particularly if the paddock is overstocked) can then dislodge the dead annual plants and loosen the soil, creating a hazardous wind erosion or water erosion situation.

Deep-rooted perennial pastures such as Rhodes grass survive year round, and whilst many do not actively grow over the hot dry summer in the south-west, they remain alive and hold the soil together. They also respond rapidly to any summer rain, providing a green pick for stock. A mix of perennial and annual pastures would be a good best-bet pasture for small landholdings in the south-west of Western Australia. However, they do have different establishment times and techniques. For further information, see references at the end of this Farmnote.

- **Feed:** Depending on the stocking rate and pasture varieties, hand feeding (and stabling of horses) will probably be necessary at some time. Purchasing and conserving feed such as hay, silage or grain will need to be included in your budget. You need to be sure that feed bought (particularly from other areas) is not contaminated with weed seeds or affected by annual ryegrass toxicity (ARGT). It is an offence to sell stock feed containing declared weeds. You should also seek advice on how to introduce feeds to animals because health problems can occur, particularly when large amounts of some grains are eaten before the animals are adapted to the feed.
- **Water:** You must ensure stock have access to enough good quality water all year round. (Adult sheep may drink more than seven litres of water per day in hot weather.) Options may include water from dams, bores or possibly the town scheme.

Stock should not be allowed unrestricted access to natural waterways, as they cause significant damage to the waterway and its vegetation. If your property has access to a waterway, you may be able to pump from it into troughs, but you must first check if you are allowed to. If so, you should also regularly check the water quality and quantity, especially over summer. Trough systems need to be checked that they are operating correctly every day in summer. If you are absent or on holidays, you must ensure that someone responsible checks the stock daily in summer.

After low rainfall seasons, water may have to be bought and carted onto the property. Alternatively, stock may have to be agisted or sold. If selling, remember stock are a commodity subject to supply and demand, so during a drought, many landholders may be selling stock at the same time, which may result in you receiving less than you paid for the stock.

If farm dams do not have adequate natural catchment, correctly designed and surveyed grade banks or roaded catchments may be required to supplement the water supply.

- **Animal Health:** There are many animal health issues that must be considered. Diseases depend on the species, the location of the property, and so on. This Farmnote cannot go into detail about all of these issues, but in general, you need to consider regular monitoring and control strategies for parasites (both internal such as worms and external such as lice) and infectious diseases. A number of diseases of stock can be transmitted to humans, making early diagnosis and treatment important. Foxes and stray dogs are also a particular threat to goats and sheep, as they can range over 10 kilometres in a night.

Many aspects of keeping healthy stock will require the use of a veterinarian and their recommended treatments. These can be expensive, yet necessary,



*Figure 4: Regular inspection of stock can lead to early detection of problems and more effective treatment.*



Figure 5: Field days are a great way to see the latest stock management techniques demonstrated.

as you are ultimately responsible for the health and well-being of your stock. If you cannot afford veterinary assistance, stock should not be acquired. You also need to budget for other contractors such as shearers and farriers.

- **Professional associations:** There are professional and breeding associations for many types of stock. They are often willing to assist landholders considering purchasing stock, as they have an interest in helping to ensure you are fully aware of both the advantages and responsibilities of owning stock. They also often have relevant literature and may know of field days being held in the local area. A search of the Internet or telephone book is a good first step in gaining assistance from such organisations.

## Further information

**Website:** [www.agric.wa.gov.au/smallfarm](http://www.agric.wa.gov.au/smallfarm)

This website is specifically designed for small landholders and has many publications relevant to small landholders (under *Farmnotes and other publications*). It also has useful links to many other sources of information (under *Useful links*).

Bulletin 4573: *Biosecurity for Small Landholders*

Bulletin 4570: *Agricultural Definitions for Small Landholders*

Farmnote No. 41/2002: *Oaten Hay Production for Small Landholders in the Central Swan Coastal Plain and Hills Region*

Farmnote No. 40/2002: *Annual Pasture Establishment for Small Landholders in the Central Swan Coastal Plain and Hills Region*

Farmnote No. 68/2001: *Summer Growing Perennial Grasses in the Central Swan Coastal Plain and Hills Region*

Farmnote No. 43/2002: *Biosecurity in the Livestock Industries*

Farmnote No. 41/1995: *Buying Healthy Sheep at Saleyards*

Farmnote No. 20/2000: *Cattle transaction tag requirements*

Farmnote No. 26/2001: *Livestock identification and movement: cattle and buffalo*

Farmnote No. 115/1999: *Livestock identification and movement: deer, camelids and ostriches*

Farmnote No. 15/1999: *Livestock identification and movement: horses*

Farmnote No. 13/1999: *Livestock identification and movement: sheep and goats*

Farmnote No. 16/1999: *Livestock identification and movement: pigs*

Miscellaneous Publication No. 58/1999 *The Land is in Your Hands: A Practical Guide for Owners of Small Rural Landholdings in Western Australia*

Miscellaneous Publication No. 2/2000 *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Rural Small Landholdings* (\$22.00 or free on the small farm website)

