

Animal welfare basics

Fact Sheet series for the
Small Rural Landholder

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Rural landholders need to be aware of their **Duty of Care** to take reasonable measures to protect the welfare of any animals that their activities may impact upon. There are acts, regulations and codes of practice relating to animal welfare that people need to adhere to (DEDJTR 2014).

If you are planning to run livestock on your new property, it's important to speak to some reliable mentors and experts before you take on any animals. It's a great idea to start with your neighbours and ask them their experiences – perhaps they might agree to a share herd arrangement to give you an idea of the species or breed requirements before you purchase your own livestock. This may also work in future should you and your neighbour/s decide to manage your land concurrently and expand your capacity and ability to rotate pastures and share costs etc.

What you need to know

Basic requirements for all livestock:

- **Appropriate safe space** to express natural behaviours – permanent confinement of animals to barns, stables and small yards and exclusion from others of the same species is cruel.
- **Safe secure fences** particularly boundary fences which should be regularly inspected and maintained. They must be safe for and appropriate to the animals being kept.
- **Adequate feed** for maintenance condition of the animals being kept – herbivores are designed to eat constantly so they need sufficient feed to keep them busy for the majority of time. This is ideally provided by appropriate grazing and browsing, and supplemented with hay when necessary.
- **Inadequate feed access** to roughage can cause digestive and other health issues – often stemming from boredom.
- **Signs of hunger and boredom:**
Horses – fence chewing and standing around in gateways
Cattle - often results in walking through and destroying fences
- **Species appropriate company** is vital for herd animals. It is **NOT OK** to keep horses, cattle and other herd animals by themselves.
- **Natural shelter from the elements** essential to protect from driving rain, wind, and sun. Tree shelter belts are the best option for providing wind breaks, decent shade and airflow in hot weather.

- **Provide tree shelter belts** (as opposed to building field shelters) which then provide food, habitat and vegetation corridors for birds and wildlife, and increasing the environmental benefits on your property.
- **Regular checks** - For grazing animals they should be inspected at least every two days. This will vary with the welfare risks at the time such as, giving birth and weather extremes. Reliability of feed and water supplies may require daily monitoring.
- **Additional welfare checks** - Weather extremes, sick or injured, very young or old and pregnant animals may require more frequent checks throughout the day and possibly overnight.

What can you do to gain experience?

If you have little experience with livestock you can start with small numbers of animals. Try species which are relatively low maintenance with regards to management and veterinary care. For example, beef cattle store steers or self shedding meat sheep breeds are commonly kept and so there is an abundance of reliable advice and veterinary expertise available.

Be aware that livestock have different fencing, yarding and husbandry (health) requirements, so these may influence your decision also.

You may consider avoiding high maintenance species or breeds such as alpaca, miniature horses or ponies, deer



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Key considerations for Animal Welfare Management

- Appropriate area
- Suitable stocking rates
- Adequate feed on offer
- Quality water access
- Secure fencing
- Shelter belts
- Daily checks
- Disease control
- Rotational strategies
- Seasonal adaptive management
- Species appropriate company



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or rare breeds until you have thoroughly established the species or breed and have the appropriate support network, veterinary expertise and experience keeping less complex animals.

Develop appropriate pastures

It is important to understand which pastures you have on your property and how suitable they are for the types of animals you plan to carry.

Cattle and sheep have different digestive systems to horses and ponies and require very different pasture compositions to maintain optimum health. Also production livestock animals have much higher metabolic needs to enable them to produce quality meat, milk, fibre and energy for reproduction.

In contrast, horses and ponies (with the exception of some animals in heavy racing work or breeding programs) and alpaca, require a constant trickle of low energy, high fibre forage. Therefore, the types of animals you wish to keep will influence the way you maintain and 'improve' your pastures.

Pastures for sheep and cattle

- a high-energy pasture base such as ryegrass and sub clover mixes are ideal.

Pastures for horses, ponies and alpaca

- native grass mixes, shaded pastures (such as those growing in a semi cleared paddock) and older style unimproved pastures are more suitable.

Pasture management

Soils - All types of pastures require healthy soil to enable optimal growth and nutritional benefits. Regular soil testing with an independent laboratory is an inexpensive way to calculate what inputs your soil requires, according to your

pasture types and production needs.

Disease control - Parasite and disease control of livestock are important aspects of animal welfare and should be taken seriously to prevent the spread of disease. Proper vaccination protocols, paddock rotation, resting and cross grazing species and appropriate parasite control programs are important for ensuring animals are not compromised by ill health. Proper pasture management can significantly contribute to improved animal health.

Where to from here?

- If planning to run livestock, what species or breed will you keep?
- How much support and research have you got in order to keep these animals with best practice welfare?
- Will it be a commercial enterprise or a hobby?
- What is your experience running these animals?
- Do you have good support from people who currently run the same species/breed AND utilise your proposed methods?
- What do your neighbours farm?
- How many head can your property comfortably maintain year round (in its current condition – not 'best practice' or 'potential carrying capacity'?)

Useful links

Agriculture Victoria - Animal welfare
<http://agriculture.vic.gov.au/agriculture/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-welfare>

Disclaimer: Western Port Catchment Landcare Network (WPCLN)

All effort has been made to give true representation, provide accurate information and apply comprehensive knowledge to this document. However, WPCLN does not guarantee the accuracy nor the conclusions drawn from this information and therefore should not be relied upon solely for decision making purposes.