Preparing for a Dry Summer

Key Messages from the El Niño Preparedness Webinar

The Outlook: A Strong El Niño Is Here

Meteorologist Chris Brandolino outlined that New Zealand is experiencing a strong, potentially historic El Niño event. While El Niño is only one of several climate drivers influencing our weather, it is expected to increase the likelihood of:

- Above-average temperatures through spring and summer
- A dry start to spring
- Reduced soil moisture levels
- Increased wildfire risk
- More frequent westerly and north-westerly winds later in spring

Prepare dry conditions now, rather than waiting until feed shortages develop.

1. Plan Early

Farmers currently have valuable warning time. Rob Macnab encouraged farmers to build simple plans around multiple possible scenarios, while Simon Hales reinforced that making decisions early creates options and reduces stress later.
"No one ever regrets making an early decision in a drought or dry period."
Rather than hoping for rain, farmers should be preparing for a range of potential outcomes and understanding what actions they will take if conditions deteriorate.

2. Feed Budgeting to Guide Decisions

Both Rob and Simon stressed the importance of feed budgeting.
Understanding feed demand, anticipated pasture growth and potential feed deficits allows farmers to make informed decisions well before problems arise.

Key considerations include:

- Estimating summer feed demand
- Running both normal and drought scenarios
- Assessing supplementary feed requirements
- Understanding likely crop yields under dry conditions

- Identifying feed deficits early

The Beef + Lamb New Zealand Simple Feed Budget Tool was recommended as an excellent starting point for farmers wanting a practical and straightforward approach. B+LNZ Feed Planning Resources
Accurate information is critical. Simon noted that pasture availability is often overestimated and encouraged farmers to challenge their assumptions, seek second opinions, and use data wherever possible.

3. Identify Trigger Points Before You Need Them

One of the strongest messages was the need for predefined trigger points.
A trigger point is an indicator that conditions have reached a level where action must be taken.

Examples include:

- Soil moisture reaching a critical level
- Water supplies becoming limited
- A set period without meaningful rainfall
- Feed covers dropping below target levels
- Crop performance falling short of expectations

Each trigger point should be linked to a predetermined action.
For example:

- Sell store stock
- Reduce trading numbers
- Purchase supplements
- Begin feeding crops
- Adjust grazing management

Having trigger points removes emotion from decision-making and helps farmers act before options become limited.

4. Protect Future Production

Simon Hales emphasised that drought management should focus on protecting next year's production rather than maximising short-term returns.

One of the most common mistakes during dry periods is allowing breeding stock condition to decline.

Poor ewe condition can result in:

- Lower scanning percentages
- Reduced lamb survival
- Poorer lamb growth rates
- Lower replacement stock performance
- Reduced profitability in subsequent years

Condition scoring was highlighted as a valuable management tool. B+LNZ Condition Scoring Learning Module

The focus should be on protecting the "engine room" of the business:

- Breeding stock
- Pasture covers
- Future reproductive performance

Sometimes this may mean reducing stock numbers earlier than feels comfortable, but maintaining productive animals and productive pastures usually delivers better long-term outcomes.

5. Build Flexibility Into Your System

Dry conditions expose weaknesses in farming systems.
Farmers were encouraged to think about:

- Whether crop areas are sufficient
- Opportunities to increase flexibility through stock policies
- The mix between breeding and trading stock
- Alternative feed sources

Simon shared examples of using crops strategically to protect breeding stock and controlling intake to ensure feed resources are used efficiently.

A recurring theme was that flexibility creates options.

Farms with multiple response options generally cope better than those reliant on a single strategy.

6. Fix Problems Before Summer

Small infrastructure issues can quickly become major problems during a drought.
Now is the time to:

- Repair leaking troughs
- Fix water line leaks
- Check pumps and reticulation systems
- Service valves and fittings
- Assess water storage capacity

Our speakers highlighted the value of remote water monitoring systems, which can identify leaks or supply issues before they become critical.

7. Understand the Financial Impact

Dry periods affect more than feed supply.
Farmers should consider:

- Cashflow impacts of selling stock earlier
- Potentially lighter sale weights
- Supplementary feed costs
- Additional cropping expenses
- Recovery costs once rain arrives

Importantly, drought planning should include both the dry period and the recovery phase.
As Simon noted:
"Drought doesn't stop when it rains."
Successful recovery often requires retaining enough pasture cover and breeding stock condition to bounce back quickly when conditions improve.

8. Communicate and Look After People

While much of drought planning focuses on stock and feed, both Rob and Simon stressed the importance of supporting people.

Farmers were encouraged to discuss plans with:

- Family members
- Staff
- Business partners
- Accountants

- Bank managers
- Rural professionals

Strong communication helps ensure everyone understands the plan and their role in implementing it.

Equally important is maintaining wellbeing. Taking time away from the farm, staying connected with support networks and ensuring family members are supported can make a significant difference during challenging periods. “It’ll still be dry tomorrow. You can still enjoy the sun, go to the beach with the townies.”

Key Takeaways

1. Plan Early

Develop realistic drought scenarios before conditions deteriorate.

2. Know Your Trigger Points

Identify the indicators that will trigger action and decide what those actions will be.

3. Use Data

Feed budgets, condition scoring, and accurate monitoring support better decisions.

4. Protect Future Production

Maintain breeding stock condition and pasture performance to position the farm for recovery.

5. Look After People

Successful drought management includes supporting yourself, your family, and your team.

While a strong El Niño does not guarantee drought, the likelihood of a warmer and drier-than-normal summer has increased. Farmers who prepare early, monitor conditions closely, communicate openly and act when trigger points are reached will be in the strongest position to manage risk and take advantage of opportunities as the season unfolds.