

Drying off perennial ryegrass pasture over summer

This summer, if you have irrigated perennial ryegrass pasture paddocks, you may choose to dry them off and restart them in autumn. Following a few simple rules will maximise your chances of getting the pasture back into production quickly, for a minimal cost.

In years when irrigation water is very limited or expensive, dairy farmers may choose to dry-off their irrigated perennial ryegrass pasture paddocks over the summer to restart them in the following autumn. Pastures can re-establish to a plant density similar to that prior to drying off, but the success rate varies depending on soil type, summer rainfall, pasture species and management. Favourable summer conditions and a combination of management strategies can improve the chance of successful re-establishment.

Drying off

Ensure the survival of the meristem or growing point of the plant. This is critical for the plant to be able to re-establish. Other factors that may affect the success rate are:

- **Timing of dry off** The later that dry off can be delayed the better the chance that enough moisture will remain in the soil to allow the ryegrass plants to survive.
- **Residual left** Leave 4–6 cm of residual pasture behind to protect the growing point at the base of the plant and ensure sufficient carbohydrates are available to keep the plant alive.
- **Variety** Perennial ryegrass cultivars have shown better survival results than the shorter rotation ryegrass cultivars at drying off.

KEY MESSAGES

Drying off perennial ryegrass pasture paddocks can provide savings in years when water is scarce

Keep pasture residuals at 4–6 cm and ensure survival of the plant's growing point

Keep stock off the pasture during the summer period

Irrigation over summer may improve re-establishment, but may not be viable in most years

Oversowing can help to fill in any gaps at re-establishment



This summer pasture is spot on with a residual of 4–6cm



This pasture has been over-grazed

Grazing and irrigation management

Keeping stock off the pasture during the summer period will increase the carbohydrate reserves available for the dormant plants and protect their vulnerable growing points from being grazed or damaged.

Irrigation over summer has been shown to improve re-establishment. However it is unlikely to be economical in most years due to the cost of water.

Restarting in the autumn

Plant survival over the summer period can vary widely depending on management and seasonal conditions. Monitor the number of surviving plants to determine if the paddock will need re-sowing or oversowing. Plants with no visible green leaf area may still have surviving tillers with viable growing points. The number of surviving plants will not be known until a few weeks after irrigations have recommenced.

Oversowing new ryegrass seed into the existing pasture is a useful strategy to fill in any gaps, especially if it is difficult to determine how many plants are still alive. Minimise damage to the existing plants when oversowing. Coulters and baker boots followed by press wheels or roller are ideal to minimise the soil disturbance and provide good seed to soil contact. Irrigate within a few days of oversowing.

Conclusion

Drying off perennial ryegrass pasture paddocks over summer and re-starting them again in the autumn can provide savings in years when irrigation water is very limited or expensive. The success of this strategy will depend on a number of factors such as summer rainfall, soil types, species, residual pasture, grazing management and oversowing. While there is no guarantee of success, your chances of getting the pasture back into production quickly and for a minimal cost will be greatly improved if you follow these simple rules. Always seek professional advice to ensure the correct choice is made for your farm.

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