



Purchasing a small rural property for keeping livestock

Introduction

Purchasing a small rural property with a view to keeping livestock can be both an exciting and daunting venture. Finding a property that suits your needs, is within your budget, and fits within the local Shire policy requirements can be challenging.

This document discusses the information you should investigate to assess whether a property is suitable for your purposes, particularly in relation to keeping livestock. While on the surface many properties can look ideal to potential purchasers, there are many details that should be checked prior to making an offer on the property.

1. What do you want to keep on the property?

With livestock, the first point to consider is the **type of animal and how many of them you are planning to keep**. This sets the initial basis that each property you consider needs to meet.

Stocking rates of different classes of animals are measured in Dry Sheep Equivalent (DSE). 1 dry wether (sheep), is worth 1 DSE, whereas 1 horse is the equivalent of 10 DSE or 10 wethers.

Animal equivalent stocking rates can be found in *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Small Rural Holdings, Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Scarp and surrounds, Western Australia*¹ (see page 7, 2.4 Animal equivalents, Table 2. Animal equivalents for the calculation of stocking rates).

Once you know the DSE of the stock you plan to run on your potential new property, you can then assess each property for suitability.

2. Zoning

All properties have zoning that sets the acceptable use of that property. The WA Planning Commission (WAPC) approves all zoning conditions for land in WA, often based on Local government recommendations.

When considering the suitability of a property, the Zoning must allow for the activities you wish to use the land for. Often there are multiple rural zonings in each shire or city, each with their own set of allowable pursuits. For example, General Rural, Special Rural, Rural Residential, Rural Landscape etc.

General Rural zoned properties have minimal limitations on the running of livestock, whereas Special Rural will have quite strict guidelines to meet in terms of the number and type of livestock that can be kept.

¹ *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Small Rural Holdings, Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Scarp and surrounds, Western Australia*, Bulletin 2-2000, DAFWA, https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=misc_pbns



Properties in the region with livestock grazing systems.

Determining the property's zoning (through the Local Government body/Shire), will allow you to see the permitted uses and restrictions for the area being considered, against your requirements.

➔ Note: Subdivision plans may also include extra covenants and restrictions that may exist in addition to normal zoning requirements.

3. Soil type

The soil type of a property will determine the stocking rate of the land. Generally, properties with heavier soils, like clay and loam-based soils will have the ability to run more animals than a property with sandy soils or rock outcrops.

Each soil type falls into a 'Stocking Rate Land Unit' that gives a recommended stocking rate* for dry or irrigated pastures. Dry land stocking rates can vary from 10 DSE per hectare down to 0 DSE. Irrigated stocking rates can be as high as 25 DSE/ha, however some soil types are not suitable for irrigation. Properties with significant slopes will usually have lower stocking rates.

**An example from the Stocking Rate Guidelines for Small Rural Holdings² is found on page 5, in section 2.3, Stocking Rate Units. It leads off with: "To simplify the calculation of stocking rates, the soil-landscape information for the Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Scarp has been divided into 10 stocking rate units with similar soils and similar management requirements."*

The stocking rates for these units are listed in Table 1²: Base stocking rates for stocking rate units (DSE/ha). A general summary of the stocking rate units is included in Section 4.

➔ Contacting the Shire can quickly determine the soil type for the property you are considering.

4. Grazable hectares

The total size of the property is less important than the grazable area of the land for livestock pursuits. The grazable area is the area of the property where animals can be run, minus any bush/vegetation or building areas (see Figure 1).

It's possible to have a 10ha property that once you take out the building and uncleared bush areas, only has a grazable area of 1ha. Or you could have a 1.5ha property that has the same grazable area of 1ha. Higher grazable acreage will allow more animals.

5. Remnant bushland

You must also keep in mind that there are restrictions on clearing bushland and trees, so you can't assume that you could create grazing area out of a bushland area. Further information can be found in the bulletin *A Guide to the Exemptions and Regulations for Clearing Native Vegetation*³.

➔ Contact with the local Shire can quickly determine bushland management requirements for the property you are considering.

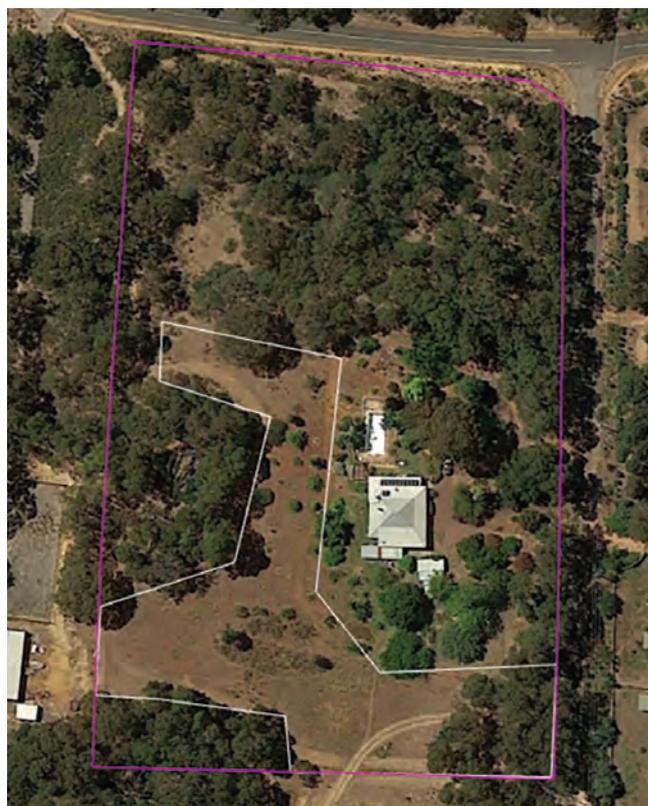


Figure 1. Demonstrating grazable hectares

2 *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Small Rural Holdings*, Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Scarp and surrounds, Western Australia, Bulletin 2-2000, DAFWA, https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=misc_pbns

3 *A Guide to the Exemptions and Regulations for Clearing Native Vegetation*, Dept Environmental Regulation, 2014, https://www.der.wa.gov.au/images/documents/your-environment/native-vegetation/Guidelines/Guide_1_-_Exemptions_and_regulations_for_clearing_native_vegetation-1.pdf



Workshops assessing pasture species and cover.

6. Carrying capacity of the property

Once you know the soil type and stocking rate of the property, you can then use this information with the grazeable area to determine the carrying capacity of the property.

Carrying capacity is defined as the amount of stock that can be run on the land all year round with minor additional feed, without causing environmental degradation.

Should the stocking rate you wish to keep on the property exceed what is allowable, then you will need Shire approval to keep animals at the higher stocking rate.

Shires will require a management plan written up to show how you will manage the property to ensure that there is no environmental degradation to the land or nuisance by dust or odour to your neighbours.

➔ **Note:** Shires differ in their requirements for a management plan. Some may have a template to fill in, others require more detail.

In Table 1, if you were wanting to buy a property that could run two light horses at 20 DSE, Property 1 would not meet your requirements. Property 2 and 3, although smaller in grazeable area, have a better soil type and are able to carry two horses.

Table 1. Property soil type

Item	Property 1	Property 2	Property 3
	Sandy soils	Loam soils	Irrigated loam soils
Grazeable area (ha)	3	2	1
Stocking rate (DSE)	6	10	25
Carrying capacity (DSE)	18	20	25



Does the soil in grazeable hectares support pasture species?

7. Irrigation — water licence/water quality and restrictions

Irrigation can increase the amount of pasture available to livestock all year round.

This, in turn can increase the number of animals you can carry on your property.

Water licence

- Irrigation for pasture from a bore will require a **water licence**.
- Bores for residential garden use are not licenced and cannot legally be used for pasture irrigation unless a **water licence is obtained**⁴.
- A water licence⁴ on a property in effect is **not automatically transferrable with the sale of the property**; however, the licence can be transferred in negotiation with the previous property owner, prior to, or within 30 days of settlement of the property.
- Further information is at *Water Licensing*, Department of Water and Environmental Regulation⁴.



Assess land use on soil type/land aspect to avoid issues with nutrient run off into aquifers/waterways.

Water quality

Where a bore exists, checking the **water quality** is essential to ensure irrigation is possible.

Bores with low flow rates or poor-quality water (brackish/saline) would reduce pasture production, animal viability and prevent the property from running the potential stocking rates.

A good reference is found on the Department of Primary Industry and Regional Development website: *Water quality for livestock*⁵.

Water use restrictions

In some areas, water licences are being restricted due to high demand for water resources in those areas. In some Shires irrigation is not permitted on high risk soil types, regardless of whether the property has been irrigated in the past.

For example, the Shire of Murray restricts irrigation on high risk soil types; see Table 3 in their *Keeping of Livestock in Rural Residential Areas Local Planning Policy*⁶.

8. Water ways and flood zones

Nutrient management

If the property you are assessing borders a waterway (river, creek, estuary or lake system), then additional assessments should be made. Nutrient loss to waterways/aquifers is coming under increasing scrutiny. Nutrient leaching as a result of livestock waste, fertiliser application and irrigation is detrimental to water systems and needs to be considered.

Soil type is again used to determine the risk. Soils with higher nutrient holding capacity like clays and loams are considered lower risk. Sandy soils are high risk for nutrient leaching. Nitrogen and Phosphorous nutrient loads for the type of livestock planned can be worked out and compared to maximum accepted levels for your soil type.

Should your desired livestock nutrient loading exceed the maximum acceptable levels, then the property should be ruled out. Further information can be found at: *Environmental Guidelines for Horse Facilities and Activities, Water Quality Protection Guideline #13*⁷.

➔ **Contact with the local Shire can quickly determine local waterway and aquifer requirements for the property you are considering.**

⁴ *Water Licensing*, Dept of Water and Environmental Regulation, www.water.wa.gov.au/licensing/water-licensing

⁵ *Water quality for Livestock*, DPIRD, 2019, www.agric.wa.gov.au/livestock-biosecurity/water-quality-livestock

⁶ *Keeping of Livestock in Rural Residential Areas*, Shire of Murray, 2018, www.murray.wa.gov.au/single-download/keeping-livestock-rural-residential-areas-llp

⁷ *Environmental Guidelines for Horse Facilities and Activities, Water Quality Protection Guideline # 13*, Dept Health, Environment, Waters and Rivers Commission and WA Horse Council, 2002, www.water.wa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/4803/13657.pdf

Waterway buffer zones

Properties that bound waterways or have them passing through the property may also have **buffer zones** (see Figure 2) that rule out livestock grazing in these zones and have setbacks for any infrastructure you may want to build. This is not always obvious and might only be marked on the property subdivision guide plan. This will reduce the grazable area and carrying capacity accordingly.

Properties that fall within 100-year flood zones or have water tables very close to the soil surface may also have extra requirements/limitations placed on them for livestock.

➔ You will need to check with the local Shire as to relevant buffer zones.



Check buffer zone requirements around waterways in determining grazable hectares.

9. Easements

Properties under consideration should also be checked for easements.

Easements exist for services such as pipelines, power lines or drainage/water management, and will restrict both building options and/or grazable hectares, depending on the specific requirements of the easement.

➔ Please check with the Shire/local land planning authorities for easement details.



Check on land use restrictions in service easements on properties being considered.

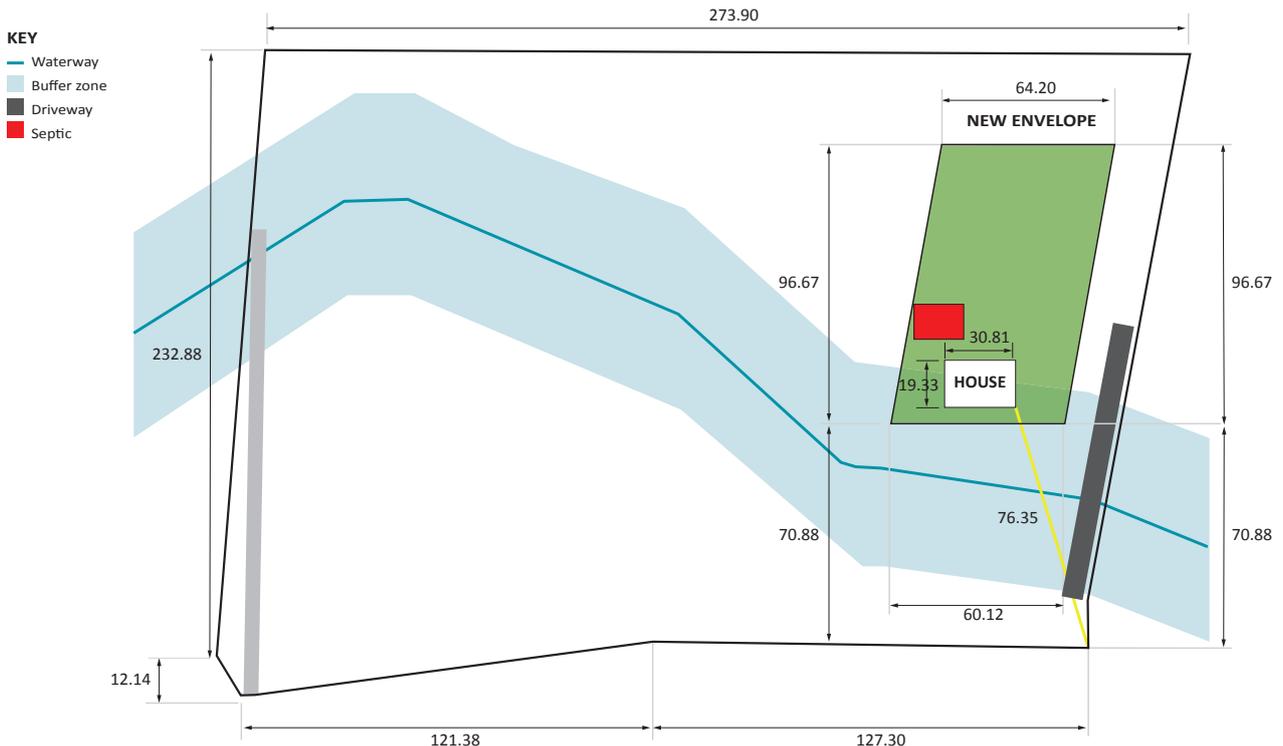


Figure 2. Waterway restrictions/buffer zones



10. Infrastructure

i. Change of use

Changes in the understanding of environmental impacts of land use and management options are ongoing. When new research determines that old management practices are damaging to the environment or are contributing to nutrient loading in waterways, new policies are created to implement changes to land use permissions.

When it comes to property management, these changes are generally implemented when the property is sold and applied to the new property owner. This can mean for example, that a 2ha property that has been set up with Shire approval, to be irrigated and run six horses, with stabling, may on change of ownership be only allowed to run one horse with no irrigation, regardless of the infrastructure that is in place.

➔ **Note: A property's existing infrastructure and use does not guarantee its suitability for future use. It pays to check this prior to purchase!**

ii. Building envelope conditions

If buying a property that you wish to, for example, build a house on and have other infrastructure for horses or stock, such as sheds and stables, you need to check if there is a designated building envelope.

A building envelope on a property can determine where you will need to build your infrastructure and, in many cases, this cannot be moved or adjusted. This can impact your overall plan for your property with grazeable area/s.

➔ **Please check with the local Shire or Planning authorities before making a commitment.**



iii. Further development conditions

On properties with existing infrastructure, there may also be **restrictions on your ability to build any further infrastructure**. Some Shires also have **restrictions on the total allowable shed size**. This can restrict the number and size of sheds/stables you can build.

➔ **Please check with the local Shire or Planning authorities before making a commitment.**

11. Other considerations

i. Services/utilities

On an undeveloped block:

- Is power and water available at the boundary?
- How much will it cost to run services to the building envelope?
- If on rainwater, does the Shire have Rainwater Tank requirements for the block to be developed?

- What size rainwater tank is large enough to accommodate the level of water usage that your family and stock will require?

ii. Declared weeds/species

Does the property have declared weeds on it? Properties with declared weeds can require costly, ongoing management over subsequent years.

→ Please check with the Shire/Ranger on the property's declared weed status.

The *Western Australian Organism List*, DPIRD⁸ WAOL database allows you search for declared species under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act*⁹, DPIRD, 2007 (BAM Act), to determine if identified Plants/Animals are declared in your area.

iii. Site aspect

a. Steep slopes

These can be prone to water runoff and cause erosion in large rain events with soil loss on and off the property that can create costly environmental and management issues.

b. Wetlands – areas of inundation

Does the property have areas of inundation that compound in wet years that would prevent your land use pursuits/the grazing of animals through portions of the year?

c. Fencing

Is the fencing suitable for the type of stock you intend to run and in good repair?

d. Grazing potential

Will the property design allow for good grazing management?



Properties with established systems need to be assessed against your planned use needs.

Publication reference

Taylor B.; Cottingham, N and McAlpine, G. (2019) *Purchasing a small rural property for keeping livestock*.

References

- 1, 2 *Stocking Rate Guidelines for Small Rural Holdings*, Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Scarp and surrounds, Western Australia, Bulletin 2-2000, DAFWA, https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=misc_pbns
- 3 *A Guide to the Exemptions and Regulations for Clearing Native Vegetation*, Dept Environmental Regulation, 2014, www.der.wa.gov.au/images/documents/your-environment/native-vegetation/Guidelines/Guide_1_-_Exemptions_and_regulations_for_clearing_native_vegetation-1.pdf
- 4 *Water Licensing*, Dept of Water and Environmental Regulation, www.water.wa.gov.au/licensing/water-licensing
- 5 *Water quality for Livestock*, DPIRD, 2019, www.agric.wa.gov.au/livestock-biosecurity/water-quality-livestock
- 6 *Keeping of Livestock in Rural Residential Areas*, Shire of Murray, 2018, www.murray.wa.gov.au/single-download/keeping-livestock-rural-residential-areas-llp
- 7 *Environmental Guidelines for Horse Facilities and Activities, Water Quality Protection Guideline #13*, Dept of Health, Environment, Water and Rivers Commission and the WA Horse Council, 2002, www.water.wa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/4803/13657.pdf
- 8 *The Western Australian Organism List (WAOL) database*, DPIRD, 2019, www.agric.wa.gov.au/organisms
- 9 *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act*, DPIRD 2007, www.agric.wa.gov.au/bam/biosecurity-and-agriculture-management-act-2007

Summary

1. It pays to do your homework in detail before purchasing a small rural property.
2. In most cases, **a phone call to the relevant Shire will provide you with the information you require to make an informed decision** as to whether the property you are interested in, is suitable for your intended purpose.
3. Real estate agents are not always aware of changes to shire policies, and
4. If in doubt, **making the sale 'subject to shire approval of your livestock management plan'** is recommended.

⁸ The Western Australian Organism List (WAOL) database, DPIRD, 2019, www.agric.wa.gov.au/organisms

⁹ *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act*, DPIRD 2007, www.agric.wa.gov.au/bam/biosecurity-and-agriculture-management-act-2007

Table 2. Property checklist

#	Item	Property 1	Property 2	Property 3
1	Livestock DSE			
2	Zoning			
3	Soil type DSE			
4	Grazable hectares			
5	Remnant bushland			
6	Carrying capacity			
7	Water — irrigation			
	7.1 Water licence			
	7.2 Water quality			
	7.3 Water restrictions			
8	Waterways/flood zones			
	8.1 Nutrient management			
	8.2 Buffer zones			
9	Easements			
	Easements			
10	Infrastructure			
	10.1 Change of use			
	10.2 Building envelope			
	10.3 Further development			
11	Other considerations			
	11.1 Services/utilities			
	11.2 Weeds			
	11.3 Steep slopes			
	11.4 Wetlands			
	11.5 Fencing			
	11.6 Grazing potential			



Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions



Acknowledgments:

This publication has been developed by Perth NRM, through funding from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

Perth NRM acknowledges the input of Belinda Taylor (Hoof Hearted Hoof Care) who researched and wrote the contents of this publication and with PNRM, facilitated its peer review. The publication is supported by the WA Horse Industry Council.

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