

Central Washington Animal Agriculture Team



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Drought Cattle Management

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It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand the problem of drought - when the soil doesn't receive rain, or otherwise get wetted, plants can't grow. When plants can't grow, cattle can't graze. Cattlemen who, on Western average, spend upwards of 50% of their operation budget on supplemental feed are acutely aware that any reduction in the amount of time their animals can spend on quality pasture will typically result in increased feed cost from alternative feed sources. If this increase in input costs is combined with poorer-doing calves from harsh weather and lower quality feed the result can be disastrous.

General principles

There is a series of recommendations commonly found in drought literature that can provide some assistance with risk management. Here are some important things to remember:

1) The reduction in forage production is less severe on ranges or pastures in good to excellent health prior to the drought. There is little a producer can do to change this today except to remember that the producer who makes the decision to "hammer" a pasture in order to get more pounds of cattle on a given area will likely suffer the following year more than the current year. To say it differently, the ability of perennials to recover post-drought is directly related to their health before and during the drought. It is smarter long-term management to be more concerned about future plant health than this

year's weaning weights. Remember that a producer of beef must first be a grower of grass. Only if you are liquidating the herd and selling the land for non-pasture use does it make any sense to disregard plant health. Don't re-stock after the drought until plants have recovered - this means don't start pasturing when the grass is only 3" tall and green. For long-term pasture health and your operation's future sustainability wait until the grass is 6-10" tall before grazing.

2) A region will tend to dry out at the same time - if you market your animals when you can't find a blade of grass, you will likely sell at the same time as everyone else and find a market depressed by excess supply. In economics, it is optimal to produce where marginal revenue equals marginal cost. In cattle, this means don't wait until you calves or yearlings are no longer gaining weight on summer or fall pasture until you sell them. At some point, you are losing money by continuing to own the animals even though they may still be (barely) gaining. Another pound gained is not another \$1.10 in your pocket unless your input costs are \$0. Many unsuspecting producers will wait until calves are losing weight and pastures are as smooth as a tabletop before selling. For the health of your pasture, cattle, and operation don't get caught in this situation!

3) A good rule-of-thumb in business is to concentrate resources on the highest potential inputs rather than spend time and money trying to make profit centers with lower marginal returns work. This is why

many ranches have sold their haying equipment. Applying this principle to cattle, one should cull open cows (a good idea every year) as well as low-producing cows. If you have limited late water, use it on the best pastures.

Specific recommendations

Reduce herd size to match available forage. Smart management is flexible. See above discussion (3) of culling in drought. This may also mean marketing yearlings earlier than usual.

Weaning early helps one avoid selling productive cows, but it may mean you have to feed at home. Calves older than 6 months will do as well on quality hay and 2-4 pounds of concentrates as they would on their mother. Creep feeding can be effective but is more commonly profitable when cows are milking poorly.

Remember that females at different reproductive stages have differing nutrient requirements. Separate cows by age and reproductive stage to allow proper feeding of each group. However, during the period when drought tends to have the greatest effect, most females will be in mid-gestation, one of the lower nutrient-demanding periods. This should allow animals to be grazed together in a rotation system, allowing much more efficient use of what forage will be available.

Supplement if you have low quality feed, such as on rangeland pasture with no summer growth. The cheapest supplement is often high-quality hay. Under some conditions (economic) it may be cheaper to feed more grain than hay. Be sure to make this conversion slowly to avoid digestive problems.

Cattle will likely need supplemental Vitamin A, as drought-stressed forage is low in carotene. Additionally, don't try to save money by discontinuing veterinarian-recommended vaccination and parasite control programs.

Avoid weed-infested hay, even if it's cheap. The future cost incurred by spreading weed seed and the reduced performance by feeding low-quality forage doesn't pay off.

Take advantage of areas dominated by annuals - graze them early when their nutrient value is high and you can control future spread of the annual by minimizing or eliminating seed production as well as put gains on cattle.

Livestock must have adequate water. During dry conditions when their feed has lower water content they need even more. A drought year could be a good year for developing additional sources of water. More watering points or sources are always a valuable management tool.

Keep good records of costs - this will help immensely in making decisions during and after the drought.

The last thing a cattleman wants is to ruin good pasture by combining severe overuse with drought stress AND lose his shorts selling calves because he waited until Halloween to get rid of them like everyone else. Work smarter, not harder.

(Adapted, in part, from the Cow-Calf Management Guide, University of Idaho)

For more information on cattle management or general drought information, visit WSU's drought website:
www.drought.wsu.edu