

## Central Washington Animal Agriculture Team



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### Management strategies for Livestock Producers During Times of Drought

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Management of harvested and grazed forages for livestock is even more critical during times of drought. Your ability to manage livestock to the changing climate will greatly impact the operation's short and long-term profitability and the future production of these pastures. Don't ignore the signs of drought, or think that it won't impact your operation. Act early, make a plan, monitor how your plan is working, review and revise the plan as needed. Make decisions based on logic not emotions. The following is a list of alternative management strategies livestock producers and managers can implement during times of limited feed and drought. For more information on each of these strategies, go to the link identified within the parentheses.

- 1) **Decision time is now.** Evaluate your current and potential resources and management options. Develop an inventory of livestock numbers, type (stage of production or growth) and feed supplies. Don't put off making critical decisions in hopes that the drought conditions **might** get better. The precipitation might improve, but it could also get worse. Concentrate your efforts and resources on your most productive animals, or those that have the greatest potential to earn money for the operation. (Drought Management Strategies for Beef

Cattle CL1130-

<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/1100/1130.PDF>)

- 2) **Implement and organize a planned grazing system.** Account for all the factors that affect and are affected by grazing. Take into account the ecosystem and available resources when developing a grazing plan. Record this plan on paper. Keep records of the: area (map), stocking rate, number of herds, additional crops available, problem areas, production levels, wildlife factors, water, and recovery period. Continuously monitor the grazing plan. Identify problems as early as possible so that appropriate changes can be made. Monitor and record plant growth, recovery period, animal condition and behavior. This will allow you to determine if the actual ecosystem reflects the grazing plan you outlined. (Designing Your Grazing Systems CL502-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0500/502.PDF>)
- 3) **Use rotational or strip grazing** to improve forage utilization and prevent overgrazing. Identify a sacrifice area where the animals will feed and bed down. This will help optimize total forage production and ensure future pasture health after the drought is

over. When there is three inches of stubble height left in the pasture, remove the animals from the pasture. Don't overgraze. Feeding hay or alternative feeds will save you from having to replant an abused pasture. (Intensively Managed Rotational Grazing Systems for Irrigated Cool Season Pastures CL592 - <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0500/592.PDF>)

- 4) **Sell low or non-producing animals.** Pregnancy testing will allow you to identify animals looking for a "free-ride". If conditions continue to worsen, look at marketing low or marginal producing animals such as those that are unsound, old, have a poor disposition, or don't conceive during the designated breeding season. Keep your breeding season short so you can feed to better meet the nutritional requirements of the animals as a group. For the long-term profitability of the operation, sell animals that will give you the least return after the drought. Delaying the sale of low producing animals will only limit future forage and feed supplies for your higher producing animals. Maintain livestock in saleable condition. (Shortening the Calving Season CL410- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0400/410.PDF>) (Weather Related Sale of Livestock and the Tax Implications CL1180- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/1100/1180.PDF>)
- 5) **Manage animals in groups** so that you can feed to meet the animals' specific needs. Separate animals by age and production stage and feed according to the nutritional needs for a specific production/growth stage. Extremely high producing (multiple births) and young growing animals have high nutritional requirements that need to be addressed so that the animals don't lose excessive body condition and become one of your low

producing animals next season. Body condition score your animals and feed according to current condition and desired level of production. (Nutrient Requirement of Beef Cattle CL300- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0300/300.PDF>) (Composition of Some Common Feed Stuff CL301- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0300/301.PDF>) (Ration Balancing CL310- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0300/310.PDF>) (Condition Scoring of Beef Cattle CL720- <http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0700/720.PDF>)

- 6) **Early weaning of animals** will reduce the animal's energy and protein requirements. It will also improve the animal's body condition resulting in improved conception rates and future productivity. Young animals still growing- (like first and second calf heifers) should be the first considered for early weaning because of their higher nutrient requirements. Calves older than 90 days or 200 pounds can be early-weaned successfully. These calves typically grow rapidly (with adequate nutrition) and probably will out-perform calves not early weaned during severe drought times. Early weaning will not necessarily increase returns, however it will help prevent/limit the long-term impact of drought conditions on both the animal and the pasture. Dry pregnant cows typically consume 30% less forage than lactating pregnant cows. This is an ideal management alternative to use during periods of short feed supplies. Early weaning will require increased management of the calf herd. (Early Weaning in Drought Conditions - <http://www.iowabeefcenter.org/Drought/weaning2.pdf>) (Early Weaning of Calves May be Economical -

<http://www.extension.usu.edu/publications/agpubs/ah/beef14.pdf>

- 7) **Contract a custom feeder** to develop replacement animals. During times of limited forage, it may be cheaper and more cost effective to hire out the development of your replacement animals; ensuring that the replacement animals get the extra care they need while saving stockpiled feed for the main herd. (Developing Replacement Heifers: Birth to Breeding-  
<http://www.ext.nodak.edu/extpubs/ansi/beef/as1169w.htm>)

8) **Supplement Forages**

- a. During times of limited forage or high hay prices it may prove beneficial to feed concentrates to animals when grain prices are moderate to low. Limit feeding grain concentrates can be cheaper and as effective as feeding hay when hay costs are high in relationship to grain prices. (Substituting Grain for Hay CL1140-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeeef/wbrcprvt/Library/1100/1140.PDF>)
- b. When there is a shortage of traditional feeds, livestock producers should consider alternative feeds such as by-product feeds, crop residues, and unusual feedstuffs. These alternative feeds can provide cost advantages during periods of drought. However, it is important to determine the nutritional quality and ensure freedom from harmful residues and toxins. Nitrates, aflatoxins, and alkaloids are toxins that should be considered when using alternative feeds such as by-products, seed screenings, crop residue, and straw. (Value and Quality Assurance of Byproduct Feeds CL370-

<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeeef/wbrcprvt/Library/0300/370.PDF>

(Byproducts and Unusual Feeds – Feedstuffs 1995 Reference Issue -

[http://cnrit.tamu.edu/ganlab/Program/by\\_products\\_&\\_unusual\\_feeds.htm](http://cnrit.tamu.edu/ganlab/Program/by_products_&_unusual_feeds.htm)

- c. Supplement pasture with hay or other supplements to stretch pasture forage availability and reduce the incidences of overgrazing. This will also allow producers to maintain animals' body condition prior to winter and times of high nutritional needs. (Supplementation During Drought CL1171-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeeef/wbrcprvt/Library/1100/1170.PDF>)

- 9) **Stock-pile forage and feed supplies** for fall and winter use. Typically, during drought conditions hay can become very expensive during the fall and winter as availability becomes more limited. Start sourcing your feeds early, identifying availability and prices. Can you afford to buy hay, alternative feeds, and/or supplements to feed your animals, or do you need to reduce your forage requirements by selling off some of your animals. Don't wait until the last minute to identify your feed sources and their cost.

- 10) **Ammonite low quality roughage** to improve intake and digestibility of low quality roughages. During times of drought it is often difficult to find moderate-to-high quality hay at reasonable prices. Ammoniation of low quality forage will allow producers to purchase cheaper feeds that are too low in feed value to meet the nutritional requirements of the livestock unless the feed is ammoniated. Caution must be used

when ammoniating particular feeds.  
(One Method of Ammoniated Straw  
for Beef Cattle CL1150-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/1100/1150.PDF>)

- 11) **Creep feeding animals** may help improve weaning weights and offset poor milking dams. Creep feeding has questionable economic benefits. However, if you are planning to wean early, or send the cattle to a feedlot for backgrounding, creep feeding can prove beneficial in training calves to bunk feeding.
- 12) **Maintain a good animal health program.** Keep animals' vaccination schedule and parasite control program up-to-date. Health problems are often compounded during times of nutritional stress. (Internal Parasites in Cattle CL690-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0600/690.PDF>) (General Principles of Vaccination and Vaccines CL605-  
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/westbeef/wbr/cprvt/Library/0600/605.pdf>)