

Forage Use and Grazing Management During a Drought

We don't need a weather man to tell us it's dry. Hopefully our livestock and hay producers will not have to deal with the same severe, sustained drought conditions that we faced in 2008 and 2009 but the long range forecast does call for a drier than normal summer.

Making proactive decisions now to address drought can alleviate long term consequences of long, sustained droughts. Forages simply don't grow very fast when they lose more moisture through evaporation and transpiration than they gain from rain or irrigation. Already we see evidence of slow forage growth. Blades of grass are curling during the day and they don't have the bright green color of non-stressed forage. As forage growth slows, stocking rates may be too heavy and overgrazing can lead to long term detrimental effects on our pastures.

One of the first things producers can look at is culling animals that are old, non-pregnant, have bad dispositions, or produce low weaning weights. Cow prices have been very good but will drop if everyone waits to cull as a last resort if we wait until all the grass is gone. Weaning calves early will reduce the grazing pressure but will also lower the cow's nutritional requirements.

Maintaining stubble heights by rotating pastures or decreasing animal numbers will help forages rebound faster when rain relief does come. Aim to keep Bermuda at two inches and tall fescue at 2 ½ to 3 inches. This also applies to hay fields. Raising the mower height may reduce the yield of one cutting but will speed up regrowth. Again, that's if we get adequate rainfall.

Also, these conditions, along with the current feeder calf prices, makes creep feeding a very good option to look at along with supplementing cow's nutrition with rations containing soybean hulls, corn gluten or cottonseed.

Establishing summer annuals like brown top millet or pearl millet can offer some emergency grazing. Of course, these forages do need some moisture to germinate, but once established they are more drought tolerant than other forage species. If drought conditions get extremely severe, cattle can be confined to a "sacrifice" paddock or pasture and be allowed to graze available forage for brief periods during morning or evening.

Don't forget though, that warm season grasses in the sorghum family (sorghum, Sudan grass, Johnson grass) may contain toxic levels of prussic acid when stressed. Pearl millet does not accumulate prussic acid. Of course, nitrates in forages are always a concern during drought conditions.

We may not be able to prevent short-term losses of pasture grasses, but with herd management we can prevent long-term losses. Lowering stocking rates (fewer animals per acre), stretching forages with hay or supplemental feeds or lowering nutritional needs will help but may only be cost effective for a short time. Culling of animals may be necessary if the drought worsens.

