

Act Rather Than React

Surviving drought requires planning well before the rain stops. A new website offers tools to develop your ranch's own drought plan.

by Kindra Gordon

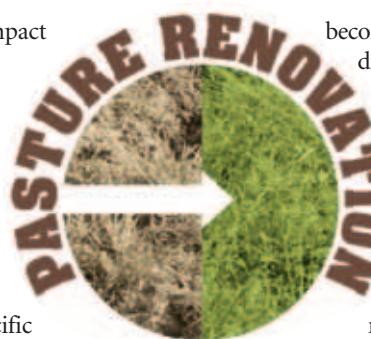
What you do before drought is what helps you survive drought." That's the consensus of several Great Plains cattle ranchers who have shared their "drought strategies" for a recently created drought planning website.

The site — available at www.drought.unl.edu/ranchplan — was launched during the summer of 2011 by the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Tonya Haigh, a rural sociologist with the NDMC, says the Center's mission is to help lessen drought effects on society. She explains that the U.S. Drought Monitor

map and the Drought Impact Reporter — a site that archives drought-related news and individual producer reports — are both tools already offered by NDMC. Now, the new website adds another facet to help ranchers create a written plan of their specific strategies to manage drought.

Haigh shares that a common mistake landowners make with drought is lack of planning. She says, "Human nature with regard to drought is to be aware, then



become concerned, then panic as drought intensifies — but once it rains, people tend to return to apathy."

Instead of crisis management, Haigh and the NDMC team stress that producers should approach drought with preparedness and risk management strategies.

"Planning, monitoring and prediction before drought can often lessen the severity of the impact of the drought," says Haigh.

Online planning tool developed

Over the last decade, the NDMC has conducted producer surveys and interviews on how ranchers were affected by drought and what management methods they felt were most beneficial to the sustainability of their ranch operation.

"Most producers did think that their management methods helped them get through the drought," shares Haigh. Management steps like stockpiling hay, being flexible with herd size and having water developments on their land were cited as beneficial.

The producers also emphasized that there is no magic bullet during drought, Haigh emphasizes. "Definitely everyone's situation and plans differ."

Based on the input provided by producers, the Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch website was created with the aim of educating ranchers about drought and providing a format to develop their own individual ranch plan — with strategies before, during and after drought.

Funding for the website was provided from the USDA Risk Management Agency with collaborators from the NDMC, South Dakota State University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Texas A&M-Kingsville.

Materials on the site are generally applicable to the Great Plains region — from Texas to North Dakota. Sections on the site include information about

- drought basics;
- inventory and monitoring;
- strategies to consider before drought;
- strategies to consider during drought;

What do ranchers do to prepare for drought?

Rural sociologist Tonya Haigh acknowledges that every ranch is unique and different. But research conducted by the National Drought Mitigation Center, she says, reveals there are some commonalities among ranchers who have been successful at mitigating the effects of drought on their ranch. What are their strategies? Haigh shares this list:

- They know how much forage they are capable of producing, how much rainfall it takes to produce that forage and what their forage demand is throughout the year.
- They build flexibility into their system.
- They manage to improve the health of their rangeland resources.
- They track rainfall and monitor their forage production.
- They know when in the year they have to make decisions about stocking rates, and they stick to those dates.
- They know what they are going to do if their precipitation or forage levels tell them that they need to adjust the stocking rate.
- They think about the long-term health of their resources and the long-term financial management of their operations.

- strategies to consider after drought; and
- writing a drought plan.

Haigh notes that the "Write a Plan" section on the website includes seven specific steps to assist ranchers with the process. These include forming a planning team that also considers conservation and financial expertise. Additionally, the vision and strategic objectives of the ranch must be considered as the drought plan is developed.

Sample drought plans from eight Great Plains ranching operations are also included in the "Write a Plan" section on the site. Haigh says, "I think the lessons shared in these real life examples are one of the most helpful parts of the website."

Haigh notes that these eight case studies share their critical dates and the target conditions they monitor during the year. Haigh says each landowner stresses how important it has been to have such dates.

"A common recommendation that kept coming up from landowners and drought advisors as we put together this website was that the earlier producers make decisions and adjust stocking rates during drought, the better."

Lessons learned

One of the featured case studies on the Managing Drought website is Welch Ranch from southern Colorado.

A spring drought tip

If you experience lower-than-average moisture in the spring, and suspect it could be a drought by summer, University of Nebraska forage specialist Bruce Anderson has some advice. He suggests feeding hay a bit longer in the spring before turning cows out to permanent pasture.

"I know this action is exactly opposite of my usual recommendation to graze more and feed less hay," Anderson says. "But, allowing pastures to accumulate a bit more growth before grazing begins will provide more total grazable forage if drought prevents much regrowth later on. Leftover hay also can be used later during the grazing season to give pastures more time to recover between grazings."

Another strategy is planting drought-tolerant forages for pasture or hay. Summer annual grasses like Sudan grass, sorghum-Sudan hybrids and pearl millet are excellent choices. Wait until soils are good and warm before planting these grasses, Anderson cautions. "Late May or early June usually is best."

He adds that these grasses could also be planted as a double crop into the stubble after wheat harvest.

"You cannot drought-proof a ranch," ranch managers share of their lessons learned. "You can help and you can delay the effects and you can minimize them, but you can't drought-proof your ranch."

Haigh concurs. She notes that severe drought can undermine anyone's plans, and the choices rangeland managers must make can be difficult.

But, she adds, "The landowners we've surveyed emphasize that the planning you do early is definitely beneficial. This website is focused on defining drought options before the drought happens." She adds, "Then if your monitoring indicates a drought

situation, the plan is there and the stress and uncertainty has less of an impact on your decision."

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Editor's Note: Access the *Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch* website at www.drought.unl.edu/ranchplan. The U.S. Drought Monitor map is available at www.droughtmonitor.unl.edu and the Drought Impact Reporter is available at www.droughtreporter.unl.edu. For additional resources on drought, visit www.angusjournal.com/drought/, the Angus Productions Inc. (API) information site developed to provide cattlemen a one-stop portal to information on how to deal with drought.