



# DROUGHT

*California Angus breeders are down, but not out, thanks to extra resilience, imagination and management.*

*by Barbara LaBarbara*

*The dry and cracking lake bed of once over-flowing Folsom Lake, near Sacramento, California.*

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"We lost a well last year. It's bad. We hope to move to Oregon by fall."  
— Kathleen Jones,  
5J Ranch, Madera, Calif.

"We sold a third of our herd last year, this year we will sell another third. If the drought continues, we may not be here next year."  
— Mike Hall, Cal Poly,  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"We're spending a lot of money and energy just to survive."  
— Kathy Schneider,  
Gold Spring Angus Ranch,  
Sloughouse, Calif.

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ive consecutive years of drought are taking a toll on California Angus breeders. Yet these resilient, imaginative, steadfast ranchers are determined to persevere.

In Southern California, at San Luis Obispo, normal rainfall is 28 inches; they only received 15 inches by the end of April.

An all-time record low run off of 1.3 million acre-feet of water flowed into the Sacramento River from October 1990 to January 30, 1991. That is 80,000 acre-feet less than the previous low which was recorded in 1937.

Storage in the major reservoirs is at an all-time low. The capacity of Shasta Reservoir is 4,552 million acre-feet of water. On April 4, 1991 it was at 2,191,200 acre-feet or 48 percent of capacity. Folsom, another major reservoir with a capacity of 1,010 million acre-feet, stands at 559,600 or 55 percent of capacity. The majority of reservoirs stand at less than 46 percent of capacity. (Note: An acre-foot of water is approximately enough to supply the needs of a typical family of four for a year.)

To add to the bad news one snow survey conducted in the Sierra measured 17.3 inches of snow, compared to an average February level of 60 inches. There will be little run-off to replenish the already wanting reservoirs.

"We have 1,400 acres of dryland grass for our 275 cows. It is dirt; there is no grass," says Melissa Oden, Thunder Hill Ranch, Willows, Calif. "The drought affected us last year, too. Our water allotment was cut to 50 percent, this year it is cut to 25 percent. It could be cut further. It seems between the environmentalists and Mother Nature, we just aren't suppose to be here."

Renewed fighting between California farmers and environmentalists is expected with legislation introduced by Senator Bill Bradley, D-New Jersey. The bill would divert Central Valley Project (CVP) water to protect fish and wildlife.

The measure would require the Bureau of Reclamation to slap a surcharge on water and power sales to generate \$30 million a year to pay for fish and wildlife restoration goals. It would also bar renewal of water contracts to farmers for longer than one year unless farmers agreed to give up a percentage of water to be used for environmental purposes.

Senator John Seymour, R-California says, "It is not a drought bill, it's a fish and wildlife bill."

More political battles are heating up as water levels go down. Representative George Miller, (D-Martinez) has asked the U.S. Interior Secretary to completely halt deliveries to farmers.

Under Miller's plan, water designated for crops would instead go to urban areas and to protect endangered species.

"It's unconstitutional, illegal and immoral," says Jason Peltier of the CVP Water Association. CVP supplies much of the irrigation needs of 20,000 farms on three million acres in the Central Valley of California and plans to cut water flows to agriculture by 75 percent.

**For the record**, agriculture is the No. 1 ingredient in California's economy. The value of agricultural products produced in Fresno County alone, one of the effected areas, exceeds the total value of agricultural products produced in 25 states.

California Governor Pete Wilson warns shutting water off to farmers will shut down whole communities and threaten jobs.

With less rainfall, well users are pumping water for longer periods of time at higher rates. Two of the suppliers of electricity in California are Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) and Sacramento Municipal Utilities District (SMUD). Recently PG&E raised their rates as much as 14 percent. SMUD rates have steadily increased with the latest being 15 percent.

"We are trying to do as much as we can to help farmers and ranchers conserve," says PG&E spokesman

Stuart Spoto. "We have a large assortment of rebates including low pressure sprinklers, time clocks to encourage time-use systems, plastic and aluminum gated pipe and energy efficient motors. We are willing to work with farmers and ranchers that are in trouble."

Besides being expensive the valley water table is shrinking. Stock water wells are drying up and irrigation wells are sucking sand.

However, sound management strategies are helping ranchers cope with the drought.

June and Ted Katsinis, Circle AK Ranch, are on a time-use system. They run the pump from 6 p.m. to noon. The PG&E flat rate is 15 cents per kilowatt hour, but on the time-use system it is nine cents.

"The time-use system brought us down from approximately \$2,700 to between \$1,700 and \$2,200 annually," says June.

Kathleen and Ron Jones say the drought spurred them on to sell their ranch. "Even if we get sufficient rainfall this year, there isn't any snow pack which will affect the valley for the next two years," Kathleen says.

According to Mike Hall, most people in southern California have either moved their cattle to another location or sold them. Some cattle have been sent as far as Iowa and Illinois.

Cal Poly State University sent 35 replacement heifers to the campus at Santa Cruz. They weaned their calves three months early in an effort to keep the cowherd in favorable condition.

The Schneiders are not planting corn this year because they need the water for their livestock. They normally lease out two Bottomlands, but find it necessary to keep them.

"You just adapt," says Kathy Schneider. "We are O.K. The cattle don't look as good as we wish they did but we are keeping them bred and healthy. The heifers have gained a lot, but the cows are giving everything to the calves."

To add to the trauma, a crop

*"At Cal Poly we feed anything," Mike Hall says "We even fed a load of broccoli. Unlike George Bush, the cows loved it. "*



BARBARA LARSEN/AG PHOTO



MARKESHO/AG PHOTO

(top) June Katsinis of Circle AK Ranch shows how high the grass should be this time of year. (above) Angus cattle kicking up dust on the dry hills of southern California.

production loan is almost impossible to secure without a pump test.

**Fine-tuning feed** and feed supplements has become necessary as forage production declines. Common supplements include cottonseed, linseed, soybean and safflower oil meals. Molasses is an excellent energy source. Mineral supplements such as calcium, phosphorus and vitamin A are particularly important for young, growing animals and pregnant heifers and cows.

"Even though our grass isn't

growing the drought hasn't affected our cattle too much for the simple reason, I put them on supplement blocks in October," explains June Katsinis. "It saved us over a load of hay and the cattle are satisfied and content."

They purchased oat hay early at \$95 and alfalfa at \$120. Oat hay is now \$135 and alfalfa is going for as much as \$160. Without the supplement, selling cattle was an option the Katsinis would have been forced to face.

The Oden's put in 80 acres of permanent pasture last year, but have no water to irrigate it. They plan to use

their water allotments on oats and an older 60 acre permanent pasture. A year ago they were paying \$13.11 per acre-foot of water now they are paying \$19.

"To take pressure off the hay situation," Melissa Oden says, "We are supplementing and feeding rolled wheat. We have bought seven, 25-ton loads of alfalfa since September. In normal years we purchase three."

The Schneiders are also using supplement blocks heavily and have been buying hay through a drought relief program. Their family has been on the ranch for five generations and they have never before bought hay for their cattle.

"At Cal Poly we feed anything," Hall says. "We even fed a load of broccoli. Unlike George Bush, the cows loved it. Next year we are going to put up brussel sprouts silage. We feed a lot of carrots in the Bakersfield area. Cattle do well on them. High water content is the biggest problem with feeding vegetables."

Because fetal abortion is a problem in the Cal Poly area, when the drought is over they will have to rebuild their herd gradually. Other problems that are intensified by the drought include worms and parasites.

However, Hall adds, "The worst part of the drought has been waiting for rain that doesn't come."

**According to the Bureau of Livestock Identification** the number of cattle inspected in California over the last four years has declined 38 percent.

"There are from 400,000 to 800,000 head of stocker cattle here in any given year," says John Braly, California Cattlemen's Association. "That industry simply isn't here right now."

Brady also says there are 20 percent fewer cows in California now than a year ago and that figure could go to 40 percent. Many ranchers like Henry Stone of Yolo Country Land & Cattle are keeping only the core of their herds. His ranch runs 1,200 animal units and he is down to 600.

Melissa Oden sums it up, "We have tried to build our herd and selling it just isn't something we're willing to do."

California ranchers may be selling down, but they aren't giving up.

**Editor's Note:** *Early spring rains and snowfall brought some relief but not an end to the California drought.*

