



*With the faucet turned off in parts of the south-central and southwestern United States many Angus breeders have been forced to join other ranchers in tightening their belts and seeking relief.*

*by Angie Stump Denton*

**I**t's July 1 but it looks like the middle of winter. What used to be green luscious pastures grazed by Angus cows are now dry, brittle and desolate. A cloud of dust rises on the lifeless grass as a single cow makes her way to scarce water.

The drought of 1996 is affecting many cattle ranching states including Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, southwest Kansas and Colorado. The lack of rain has contributed to mass crop failure and high feed prices that have forced cattle producers to consider selling off large portions of their herds.

After receiving only 30 to 40 percent of their annual rainfall, Eddie and Karen Parker, Waurika, Okla., are having to make some tough decisions. Their south-central Oklahoma ranch has not had any water run-off in more than a year.

Recipients of the 1995 Central Region Land Stewardship Award the Parkers practice rotational grazing to more effectively use the lands' resources. This past year, however, they've had to combine cattle and overstock due to lack of water.

"Our major concern is the lack of stock water," Eddie says. "Right now we cannot rotational graze because of the water situation; we've had to combine groups of cattle to get

them where the water is." To overcome this problem, he's currently working on developing a drought-proof watering system for his ranch. With July temperatures higher than 100 degrees and steady southerly winds the ponds were evaporating fast. A possibility for the Parkers is pumping the water from a large pond to tanks and watering the cattle out of the tanks.

Because of their stewardship practices only their improved grasses are being affected by the drought. Without rain soon, however, their cool-season annual, Marshall ryegrass, which is used as a winter pasture for weaned calves, yearling bulls and heifers, and fall calving pairs, will not be sufficient.

COURTESY: MARGIE WILKINSON PHOTO

**The Parkers' winter feed** costs averaged three to four times higher than normal due to lack of rain and the high cost of feed last fall. If weather conditions remain the same the Parkers will have to find forced options for their herd this fall and winter. Eddie says one alternative could be selling some of their 350 cows.

Cattle producers in drought areas are dealing with low cattle prices, dried up pastures, the high cost of feed and a shortage of hay. Luckily, the Parkers have found 250 acres of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) ground to bale so they will have an adequate hay supply, but others in drought stricken areas are going to be forced to pay high prices for roughages this fall.

John Caddel, Oklahoma State University forage agronomist, predicts that yields of hay and pasture meadows in Oklahoma will be down almost 50 percent, although this is variable by management practices and spot rains.

**Texas is suffering** through a drought that could be as damaging as any in the state's history. The severity of drought conditions vary by region, but every Texas farmer and rancher has been hurt by the lack of rain.

Average annual precipitation in the state varies from 8 inches in west Texas to more than 60 inches in the eastern part of the state. Severe drought conditions in east Texas would be considered a wet season in west Texas. While there is some degree of drought in at least one region of the state every year, Texas is now experiencing a drought across the entire state.

In a report by John Sharp, Texas comptroller of public accounts; the 1995-96 Texas drought had cost cattle producers an estimated \$793.6 million through May 1996.

"It is pretty bad," Troy Glasson, Texas research specialist, said in early July. "Things haven't improved, we've had 100-plus-degree heat

every day this last week. The only thing that will help is getting some rain."

Glasson says it will take a hurricane off the coast to bring Texans the relief they need. He predicts if they don't receive four or five days of soft rain soon there could be a lot of producers going out of business.

A May 1996 study by Texas A&M University estimated that total agricultural value could fall by as much as \$2.4 billion unless the severity of the drought lessens. Livestock production had been expected to earn \$6.7 billion this year, more than one-third of all agricultural earnings in 1996. Texas A&M economists expect this number to decline by \$838 million or 12.5 percent due to the drought.

The drought in Colorado hit the winter wheat crop the hardest. The Colorado Department of Agriculture estimates winter wheat production in Colorado will be 31 percent less than the 1995 crop. Of the 3 million acres planted with winter wheat, only 2.3 million will be harvested.

The drought is not only putting a toll on agriculturists, it's affecting the whole Colorado economy. With the loss in Colorado wheat production, and if livestock sales are reduced by 10 percent, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension ag economist Mel Skold estimates a reduction in total sales across the state of \$560 million.

With a lack of feed and low cattle markets many producers are wondering what their options are. Producers in areas approved for emergency drought assistance have access to several drought assistance programs through the U.S. Department of Agriculture including:

1. The Emergency Loan Program, also known as the Secretarial Disaster Declaration;
2. the Emergency Livestock Feed Program; and
3. the Emergency Grazing Program.

## Forage Management in a Dry Year

During this challenging, belt-tightening year, producers should consider these forage management suggestions.

- One option for producers is ammoniating wheat straw. Treating wheat straw with anhydrous ammonia takes a product with little or no feed value and improves it to the equivalent of fair-quality prairie hay. Greg Highfill, Oklahoma Extension Service area livestock specialist, estimated the cost of ammoniated straw to be approximately \$40 per ton, \$25 per ton for baling and hauling and \$15 per ton for ammoniation.
- Use some type of rotational grazing to utilize the pasture produced and to provide a rest period so grass remains vigorous. When considering this option make sure abundant stock water is available.
- Harvest hay at an early stage of growth to produce a more nutritious hay crop.
- Consider using hay preservatives. This may make the difference between baling a high quality crop versus getting it ruined by the rain.
- Store hay properly to reduce spoilage and retain its quality.
- Consider a forage crop such as sudangrass or millet for mid-summer grazing.

The Emergency Loan Program provides eligible participants with low interest loans through the Farm Service Agency for agricultural losses due to drought and other devastating conditions.

The Emergency Livestock Feed Program (LFP) provides producers with up to 50 percent of the cost of feed in times of crisis. This program replaces only the feed that would have been produced on the applicants' farms if the emergency conditions did not exist. On April 4, 1996, President Clinton signed the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 that among other things, terminated the LFP at the end of May. However, with the tough times that the agriculture industry has had due to drought conditions, the program was extended until Aug. 31, 1996. On this date, funding for the program will expire, but the USDA could extend the program another 90 days.

The Emergency Grazing Program applies only to producers participating in CRP. The Emergency Grazing Program allows eligible producers to graze their cattle on land that they have enrolled in the CRP. Producers enrolled in the CRP agree to plant cropland susceptible to erosion with soil-stabilizing grasses or trees to conserve the land. They do this in exchange for annual rental payments from the federal government. Only in severe times, such as drought, are eligible producers able to graze their cattle on these lands, which helps to reduce the costs of feeding their cattle.

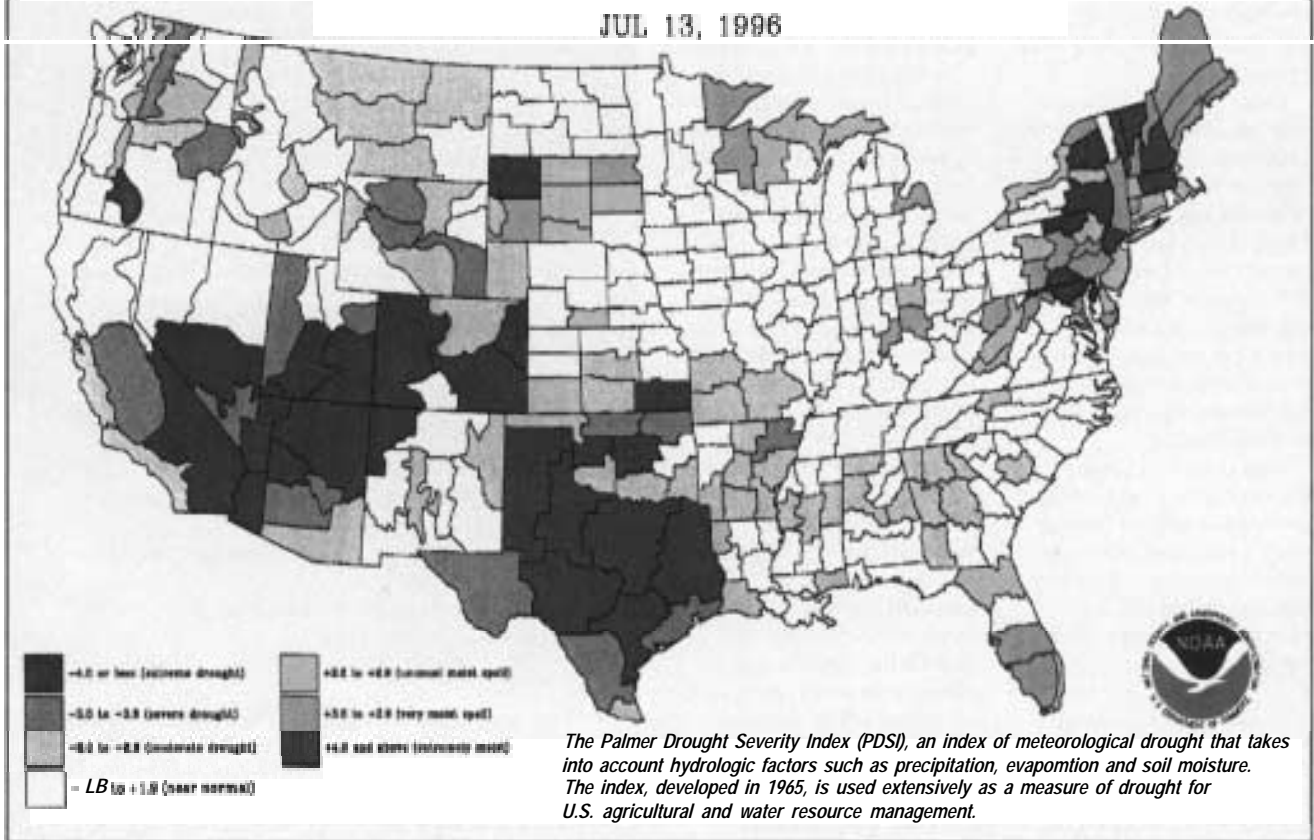
President Clinton and the USDA have developed or extended programs to assist producers during this crisis. On April 30, President Clinton ordered a massive beef buy to "bolster beef prices." This beef will be served in school lunch

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## DROUGHT SEVERITY INDEX BY DIVISION (LONG TERM PALMER)

JUL 13, 1996



*The Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI), an index of meteorological drought that takes into account hydrologic factors such as precipitation, evaporation and soil moisture. The index, developed in 1965, is used extensively as a measure of drought for U.S. agricultural and water resource management.*

programs during the 1996-97 school year.

By extending the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) to cover both insured and uninsured producers of failed grain crops, the President gave an estimated \$70 million in relief to Oklahoma and Texas feed grain producers. The NAP program was originally set up to provide crop loss protection for producers of crops that are not eligible for crop insurance.

State agencies are also working to lessen the burden on their farmers. In Texas the Department of Transportation (TxDOT), at Comptroller Sharp's request, has asked its district engineers to promote their discretionary program allowing farmers and ranchers to cut and bale grass from state

rights-of-way.

The Colorado State Cooperative Extension is helping match people who want to buy and sell hay. Ranchers with hay to sell can contact the Southwest District office in Alamosa at (719) 589-2271 or the LaJara office at (719) 274-5200. Ranchers who want to buy hay can call the Extension Information System at (719) 589-4045 to obtain names of people with hay to sell.

An 800 number has been established in Texas to help match producers with sources of supplemental feed. The Texas hay hotline number is 1-800-687-7564.

Most people would agree that a drought brings negative connotations to an area, but in a different light it gives producers an opportunity to plan for the future. It also gives them an opportunity to cull animals that

are inadequate producers which will cost the producer more in the long run. Late bred females, cows with lost calves and poor milk producers which should be culled otherwise can go to market and relieve some feed stress.

Although there is no simple definition for drought, an effective description could be a worrisome lack of rain. Still by planning and not panicking, producers can use this opportunity to build a stronger, more uniform herd that will bring them more profits in the future.

*Sources: Kate Forgach, Colorado State University; reports from the Texas comptroller's office; John Caddel, Oklahoma State University; and the Internet.*

