



Day after day you get up and face the dust; the parched, brown pastures; and the hungry cows. Every night you stay up that extra hour to catch the late weather,

hoping for even a hint of desperately needed rain. Drought doesn't come with the suddenness of a tornado or flood; it creeps up on you, wears you down gradually and never seems to end.

For parts of the East and the South, the drought of '99 actually began in '98. "From July of '98 to July of '99, there may never have been as bad a weather in the history of this farm," says Doug Williams.

He's got the facts to prove it. The young Angus breeder and his brother, Derek, are the fourth generation on the Milan, Ga., farm, and this past year's drought is the worst recorded in 110 years.

Their lack of forage actually started with too much of a good thing. From October '97 until April '98, 55 inches (in.) of rain drenched their Turnpike Creek Farms, which they operate with their father, David. "Our winter grazing did nothing," says Doug. "We fed all our hay, then it dried up. We had two natural disasters back to back."

The rainfall did produce an early cutting of hay in the spring of '98, but that was it. In July, armyworms, the ultimate drought opportunists, moved into what was left of their Bermuda-grass pastures. "Derek sprayed the pastures four times, and they still got it," says Doug.

"We never had anything so dramatic," he continues. "Before, if the rye didn't make it, the oats would. This time we had no reserves whatsoever. The pastures, especially land that was no-tilled with winter grazing, literally looked like a sand bed. There was nothing there."

It stayed so hot and dry that Derek even baled the worm-eaten Bermuda grass in December.

The timing couldn't have been worse. David had started the registered Angus herd in 1980 with 25 open heifers. With part-time help from his sons, who were in school, they expanded. Then, in 1992, both Derek and Doug finished college and came back to the farm. By the late '90s they decided they either had to increase to around 200 cows and market their cattle on the farm or had to reduce the herd and plant pine trees.

"We took a gamble," says Doug. "We bought a 25-cow herd in March of '98 and picked them up in April. Then it didn't rain."

# Long, Slow Suffering

*Unlike most natural disasters, drought lingers and leaves producers wondering if they can outlast Mother Nature.*

BY BECKY MILLS



BECKY MILLS PHOTOS

**Doug Williams says the relationship among he, Derek and their father was a major support system. "We spend a lot of time together," he says. "If one of us is down, the others will pick him up."**



**In Virginia** it was the same story, only longer. While the rains started again in July of '99 for Turnpike Creek, Bill Wampler says in his area they only had about 2½ in. from May until Labor Day. "The drought really started last fall, then got particularly bad this summer. This is the worst drought I've seen."

The Harrisonburg Angus breeder says he did make an early cutting of hay, but he had to feed it all summer. "We've been running cattle on this farm since 1941, and I've never fed hay in the summer before," he states.

In Moneta, Va., Angus breeder and stockyard operator Albert Epperly says, "It has been unbelievable. We're burned up — dry as a chip. People made a 30% to 40% hay crop. That is all first cutting; there was no second or third cutting."

Epperly says the situation turned from chronic to acute when their creeks and ponds dried up. "Lack of water has been as big a problem as lack of feed," he says. "People are calling and telling us their cattle have got to go today. They don't have any water."

Epperly says the drought is also causing long-term problems. It already has hurt their monthly Angus-sired feeder-calf sales because producers are having to sell their calves early. Besides reducing the sale numbers, he says it also is hitting the producers who are selling lightweight calves.

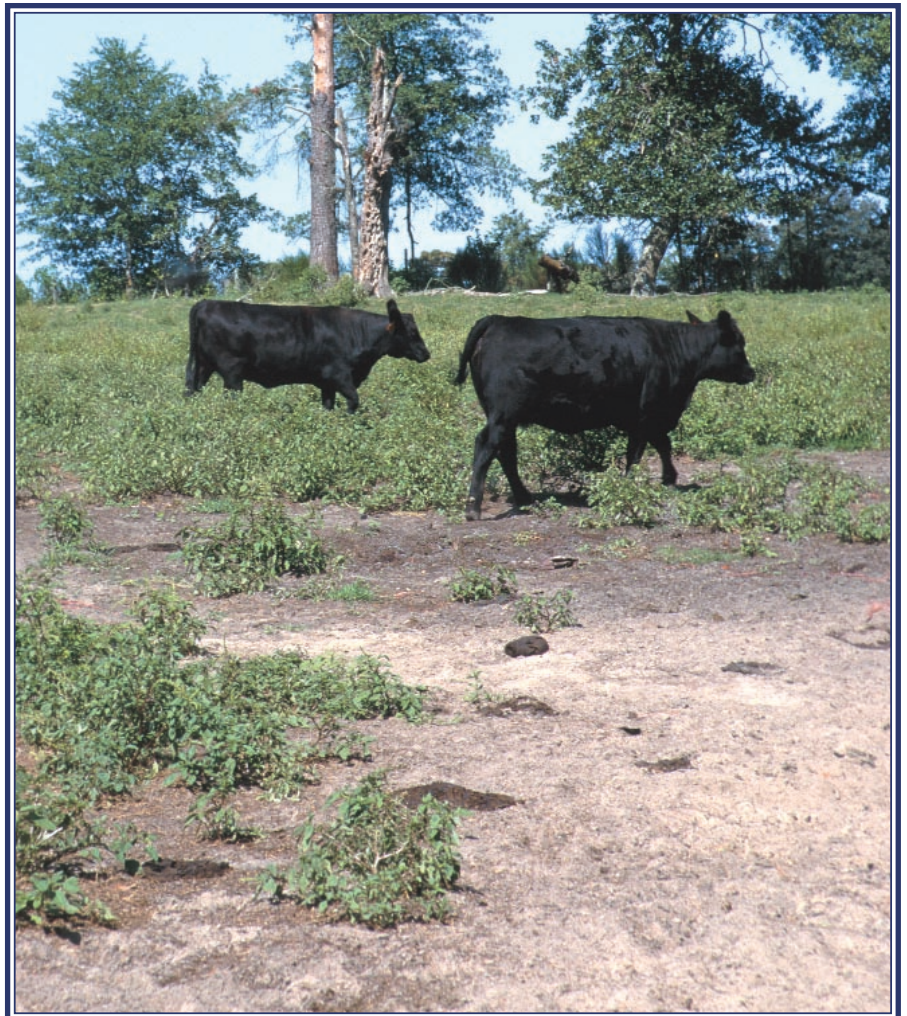
"The calves that have been selling in the Angus-sired sales have been selling at 500 to 600 pounds (lb.) and 80¢ to 85¢, or \$400 to \$500 a head," says Epperly. "They've been having to sell them early, at 300 lb. Luckily, they're still bringing 90¢ to \$1.10, but that is only \$270 to \$300 a head."

While the feeder-calf market has held, Epperly says it is a different story for cull cows. "The butcher-cow market has been pretty tough," he states. "The longer-term shock is, we're seeing a lot of open cows at the market. Next spring folks are going to find out that the cows they thought were bred are open."

**Back in Georgia**, the Williamses started looking at their options. "We either had to quit or adapt," says Doug. "It was that bad. You think for two or three weeks it is going to rain. Then it gets hotter and drier, and it looks like it is never going to rain. You wonder why you didn't sell out and quit. But then you realize there are some things you can do."

"We started thinking of ways to make it," Derek adds. "I tried to think of ways to get water."

The Williamses had installed a center-



**In late August Doug Williams pointed to his springing replacement heifers. "They've only seen green grass for the last three weeks of their lives."**

pivot system in '96 that covered 40 acres, and they had built a pond in the fall of '97 but decided it was time to invest more in irrigation. They borrowed \$60,000 and bought a traveling gun system and put in another pivot, which will cover 70 acres, including 18 acres of Tifton 85 Bermuda grass.

"When you have three people trying to make a decision, usually two are for it and one against it," says Doug. "But all three of us sat down at the table and said this is what we have to do. It saved us."

During the summer of '99 Derek grazed 60 dry cows on the 18 acres of irrigated Bermuda grass and cut 100 round bales of hay. They also rented out their peanut allotment and planted Bahia grass and millet under the 40-acre pivot.

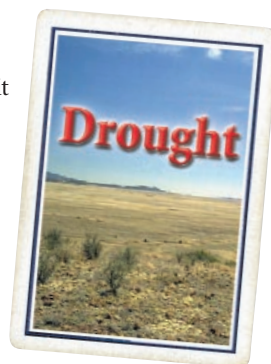
Before they could get up to speed with the irrigation, they bought 250 round bales

of hay and supplemented with a hot mix of cottonseed meal and salt. They also supplemented their replacement heifers with 3 lb. of grain per head per day, half bought and half homegrown.

In late August Doug pointed to his springing replacement heifers. "They've only seen green grass for the last three weeks of their lives."

To pay for the hay, the Williamses culled their open and poorer-producing cows. "On the positive side, it told us what cows could survive," Doug says. "There is no question what needed to be culled."

**Oklahoma Extension beef specialist** Dave Lalman agrees with the wisdom of culling. He also says, "If you're going to sell cows, sell them early. It relieves pressure on the rest of the forage resources, and the cows you keep should be in better condition."



CONTINUED ON PAGE 70

To lower the numbers on his Virginia operation, Epperly reduced his replacement-heifer herd from 88 to 32 head. He also sent his females to the forage supply, rather than bringing the forage to them. "We sent two pot loads of heifers and young cows to Nebraska to graze. The young cattle have been the most stressed because of the drought," he explains. "We'll bring them back in the spring."

In Staunton, Va., Jeff Kaufman is stretching the forage on Sugar Loaf Farms by letting the cows graze the stunted corn

crop, another practice Lalman recommends. "Usually when you have low pasture production, there are also quite a few crop failures. Milo, corn and soybeans work quite well for grazing."

The specialist adds, "If it is mature crop residue, especially corn or milo, you may need to provide a small amount of protein supplement to maximize the utilization of the resource."

Kaufman also is weaning the calves from his first-calf heifers a month to a month and a half earlier than usual.

"This is usually one of the first things we recommend during a drought," says Lalman. "It reduces the nutritional requirements of a cow by a third almost immediately."

Obviously, though, even with the most careful management, drought costs money. At Turnpike Creek, along with the \$60,000 investment in irrigation equipment, there was a \$6,000-plus bill for hay and a spray bill for \$4,500.

The government wasn't much help. The Williamses got a check for emergency assistance, but it barely covered half the cost of spraying for armyworms. To add insult to injury, it was expected in January and didn't come until May.

To get through the rough spots, they relied on outside income from David and Doug, as well as financing from the irrigation company, their hometown bank, and a loyal friend.

"The debt load wasn't that great on the farm," Doug comments. "Dad has always been one to pay as he goes."


The Williamses also were blessed with good prices at their first production sale, which was conducted in March. That also reduced the number of cattle on the place by 90 head.

To cut his losses, Wampler is holding a dispersal sale in December, rather than in the spring as planned. He estimates he'd have to buy \$30,000 worth of feed and hay to get his cattle through the winter.

**In his area**, Epperly says, the strong feeder-calf market has helped producers weather the drought-induced tough times. "Luckily, because of the feed supply in the West, these feeder cattle have been high. That's been a relief."

The strong prices are in spite of the increased numbers going through the Virginia markets. At their Spring Lake market, Albert and his father, Frank, say they are selling 400-500 head more a week than they usually do in the summer.

Normally 600-900 head sell each week in Lynchburg. "In the last four weeks they've sold over 2,000 head a week," Albert said in early September.

As for the Williamses, they're looking ahead and hoping they'll be better prepared next time. "Irrigation isn't the total answer, but it helped us get over the hump," says Doug. "Hopefully it will help us down the road by building our reserves." 

### Keeping perspective

The drought was just one of the challenges facing the Williamses from the fall of '98 through the spring of '99. Doug's wife, Tammy, was flat on her back in bed with a problem pregnancy from September until the middle of November. To complicate matters even more, the Williamses were trying to restore an old barn to use as an office and sale barn for their first production sale, scheduled for March 6.

"The drought was kind of a blessing. I could come home every afternoon after school and work on the barn," says Doug, who works half days as a Young Farmer advisor.

With last-minute hired help, they finished the sale barn in time for the sale. Friends, neighbors, church members and fellow teachers pitched in on sale day. In two hours and 40 minutes, 90 lots of yearling bulls and heifers sold for an average of \$1,500. "We were blessed," says Doug.

A week later Tammy delivered Daniel, who joined his big brother, Drew, in their family.

Doug says it is his family that helped him keep his perspective during those rough times. While they were struggling with the drought, he says, he had friends who had it much, much worse. One close friend's wife was stricken with cancer, while his pastor lost a child to the disease. "I didn't have room to complain, not with what some of my friends were going through," he comments.

Doug also says the relationship among he, Derek and their father was a major support system. "We spend a lot of time together," he says. "If one of us is down, the others will pick him up."

He also says Drew and Daniel are an incentive to work through the discouraging times. He states, "We've got to keep going for the next generation, so they'll have the things we've enjoyed."



# Keeping an Ace in the Hole: Financial Management in the Face of Disaster

There are several cards to play when dealing with the financial burdens accompanying weather-related production losses and property damage.

## BEFOREHAND

- ♦ Maintain your physical facilities. Structures and equipment in disrepair are more likely to sustain heavy damage or to fail altogether during extreme weather. Preventive maintenance will help reduce repair and replacement costs later.
- ♣ Evaluate your insurance. Make sure expensive equipment and hard-to-replace items are covered. You may have to establish higher deductibles to afford the necessary coverage. Be familiar with claims processes.
- ♥ Compile complete personal and business inventories. These will assist in filing insurance claims. Keep these records and all important documents somewhere that's protected from the very types of disaster from which they're meant to protect you.
- ♠ Establish an emergency fund. Put money away to cover the deductibles and co-payments on your insurance policies and the costs of replacing uninsured items.
- ♦ Set spending priorities. Before the stress of a disaster that leads to reduced income, know how you'll adjust. Remember that maintaining your family's welfare and satisfying creditors will be most important. Dividing your expenses into fixed and variable costs is a good place to start.

## AFTERWARD

- ♣ Promptly notify your insurance representatives.
- ♥ Contact your tax advisor about deductions allowed for certain losses.
- ♠ Investigate assistance from local, state and federal agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Farmers' Home Administration, Small Business Administration, Farm Service Agency, Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Labor.



- ♦ Explore the relief efforts of volunteer entities like churches, the Red Cross and Salvation Army.
- ♣ Institute your emergency spending plan. Carefully reconsider urges to modify it. Questioning calm decisions made in advance may be unwise while you're stressed.
- ♥ Take stock of your financial and physical resources. Be creative in finding ways to cover expenses; bartering is a skill.
- ♠ Carefully weigh the penalties and lost interest income associated with cashing certificates of deposit (CDs) against the interest costs of short-term loans if you become short on cash.
- ♦ Contact creditors about restructuring your debt retirement.
- ♣ Use available credit wisely. It will be more difficult to make payments after recovering from the situation.
- ♥ Decrease your savings cautiously. Don't sacrifice long-term goals for short-term comforts.
- ♠ Beware of fraud as you rebuild. Rip-off artists generally prey on disadvantaged people who are under stress.
- ♦ Once you've recovered, don't try to "catch up" on your spending. Remember, the sacrifices you made were necessary; there's no need to make up for them.

— Brad Parker

**Editor's note:** This information was compiled from resources available from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Extension services of the University of Arkansas, University of Illinois, North Carolina State University and North Dakota State University.