



PHOTOS BY KELLI TOLEDO

# Managing the California Drought

Experts agree, it's the worst drought in California's history.

by Paige Nelson, field editor

**D**rought is always bad, but for Californians, this drought is the worst on record, says Darrel Sweet, a fifth-generation commercial-Angus rancher from Livermore, Calif. Just a peek at the state's official drought website — [www.ca.gov/drought/](http://www.ca.gov/drought/) — shows viewers side-by-side comparisons of Folsom Lake in 2011 with Folsom Lake in 2014. The 2011 photo is a boater's dream, with acres of dark blue water just waiting for a wake to cross. The 2014 landscape looks more like a construction zone on a highway overpass (not a dam).

By June 12, 2015, even senior water rights dating back to 1903 couldn't be filled, according to a California state release.

Besides the surface-water problems, Sweet reports that even 300-foot-deep domestic wells have started running dry in his area.

Nevertheless, just as the Angus community would expect, Angus producers around the state are persevering.

## Drought conditions

Although the summer was dry, that's expected in California. A dry late fall, winter and early spring isn't.

"The climate that we have in California is a Mediterranean climate. Our wet season is from October to May, annually. That's when we get our rain, and in our higher elevations, we get a snowpack. We don't expect rain in the summer months," Sweet explains.

He says the grasses are annuals and have already made their seedheads when the summer heat simmers.

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**"The summer rains don't help dry grass. You can't revive what's dead."**

**— Darrel Sweet**

► **Above:** This photo was taken in March of 2011, prior to the recent California drought, near Hanford, Calif., in Kings County on native rangeland.

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“Our feed is all dried up, even on a normal year, by June or so. The summer rains don’t help dry grass. You can’t revive what’s dead,” he notes.

Sweet also reports that in some areas, like coastal San Luis Obispo, landowners are losing oak and pine trees, either due to lack of water or due to increased vulnerability from disease and pests.

Speaking of the 2014-2015 wet season, Sweet says, “Overall, for beef production, it was another dry year.” Thanks to timely fall and winter rains, ranchers Sweet; Ryan Nelson of Wilton, Calif.; and Marty Williamson of Exeter, Calif., assert this year was better than last.

“This year [the rain] started in October. The amount was lower than what we would have liked, but the timing was ideal. It seemed like every few weeks we’d get a good rainstorm that kind of kicked the can down the road. We’re better than we thought we would be, but it still wasn’t a great year. It wasn’t even a good year, but it was better than 2013 and 2014.”

Williamson says his grass was better this year, but isn’t sure if that should be attributed to timely rainfall or just fewer cattle on his range.

### Making tough calls

Reminiscent of the great Texas and Oklahoma drought of not too long ago, California ranchers have had to make drastic herd reductions to stay on the rangeland. Williamson has condensed his cow herd by 40%. Until a couple of years ago, he also supplemented the herd with stocker cattle during the winter, but he has since stopped.

“We’ve reduced numbers every year to a certain degree over the last four years. That’s the main thing — to reduce numbers to what the ranch can handle,” he explains.

Nelson says his family’s registered herd has experienced heavy culling. The allowances for staying in the herd have become stricter with each year.

“We did a lot of that heavy culling, so all the females that were left in the herd were outstanding, some of the best we’ve ever had.

“The way the cattle market is, our focus should be on growing our herd, but the drought has really set that back, so that probably has been the most frustrating part,” he says. “Here we are with having to sell a lot of good animals because we didn’t have the grass and didn’t really want to pencil having to throw

**“That’s the main thing — to reduce numbers to what the ranch can handle.”**  
— Marty Williamson



►After two years of drought conditions, rangeland near Hanford in March of 2013 was green, but had little to no growth.



►Native rangeland near Hanford during the spring of 2014 showed similar growth conditions as the previous two drought years.

them a lot of hay and grain their whole lives.”

Sweet, also the chairman of the board of directors for the California Rangeland Trust, says, “There are some ranches in some parts of the state where basically the cattle are gone.

There are little pockets of cattle people are trying to hang on to.”

Those ranchers on public grazing lands like Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service have been required to reduce numbers, and on and off dates have been adjusted, he adds. “If

there’s not water and there’s not feed, they cut back carrying capacity.”

Amidst the dry circumstances, 29-year-old Nelson has found a silver lining in selling animals during high-dollar times.

“The timing couldn’t have been any better,” he notes. “If this was five or 10 years ago, it would have stung a lot more with the value being lower than it is now, for sure. It was nice to get the check because the cattle are worth a lot, but you wish you had the animal instead.”

### Management decisions

The cattle still on the ranch cost a lot, too.



► December 2014, usually a wet month for California's Mediterranean climate grew little to no forage on native rangeland near Hanford.



► Hanford rangeland showed little promise in March 2015. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, between the months of October 2014 through May 2015, Hanford received 5.04 inches of precipitation. The area average according to U.S. Climate Data is 8.95 in. per year.

In good years and bad years, Nelson says he supplements his cattle with protein tubs. Lately, he states, he is supplementing more protein on a per-animal basis.

Most producers, says Sweet, have had to supplement their cattle with hay.

"Hay prices have been high, so that's sort of a temporary solution," Sweet says.

Williamson fed hay for a few years, but eventually resorted to reducing numbers.

California's large dairy industry and strong export market have made hay prices high for years. Drought conditions and restrictions on irrigation haven't helped the situation.

"It's \$250 to \$300 per ton. It's kind of been

close to there for the last several years. That's expensive when you're feeding it twice a day every day," Nelson remarks.

Sweet says hay entering the state from Nevada and Oregon is not unusual, but the drought has been widespread enough to have also affected Oregon's hay surplus. Demand is strong and supply is tight, he explains.

Last winter, Sweet fed almond hulls to his range cattle. Typically, byproducts like almond hulls have gone to dairies and feedlots. If you can find a way to feed them to range cattle, they make a good supplement, he claims.

"It doesn't make up the whole diet, but

it can reduce the hay bill. Almond hulls are about 70% TDN (total digestible nutrients)," he says.

Emergency feed programs through the USDA have compensated producers based on the loss of feed per pasture, Sweet adds. Ranchers have been able to buy feed through those programs.

Alternative pastures are few and far between, but in some cases they can be found, states Sweet.

"Sometimes you can rent some extra pasture. Numbers have been reduced enough that in some cases, some places have been destocked. Then it rains and some grass grows, and so you kind of have an opportunity to rent some of that," he says. "But renting extra pasture is hard to do when there isn't much pasture available and everyone is looking for it."

Still, progress has been made during the drought as producers have invested in water developments throughout their range. Sweet says the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been useful in helping ranchers fund improvements; many ranchers have funded projects themselves.

"We've had a lot of springs go dry. A lot of shallow wells have gone dry. A lot of ponds have gone dry. The source of water for the ponds is runoff. If you don't get much runoff, the ponds don't fill. Stock water, next to lack of feed, has had equal effect almost," Sweet describes.

Sweet recalls producers who have worked on spring development and water storage options amidst the drought conditions. Others have survived by hauling water in water trucks.

"There's been a lot of trucking of water. There's pastures that have feed but have no stock water, so trucking water has made them work," says Sweet. "People have even been trucking (water) in the winter."

Solar pumps on wells have enabled Williamson to keep his cattle on the range. The number of workable well sites is limited, he says, so he keeps a vigilant eye on the stock water all the time.

Nelson has also worked on water development and now has three water troughs on the ranch that work year-round. Before the well development, he was relying on some seasonal ponds for water. In this country, he says, summers are dry as a bone.

"If you can consider yourself any kind of progressive producer, you're trying to develop water," he states.

According to Sweet, some water developments have in fact added carrying

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capacity, even during the worst drought years.

“A lot of those water systems developments have added grazing capacity by getting water into areas that didn’t have water very well before,” he clarifies.

### Onward

In the face of considerable adversity, Nelson, Sweet and Williamson preserve an onward attitude.

Williamson says he plans to keep 225 heifers this year, the first time in three years he’s kept any replacements.

“If the drought continues, we’ll sell those heifers in the fall, but we have feed to keep them through the summer. About all you can do is put the amount of cattle out that the ranch can support. If it doesn’t rain, and we

don’t have feed, we certainly won’t be adding any additional livestock,” he states.

Sweet recognizes what the drought has taught ranchers, whether the lessons were welcome or not.

“It’s made us more resourceful, and it’s certainly made us more appreciative of having good water systems in place. Solar pumps, water storage tanks and water distribution, that’s not new science ... but there is a renewed recognition that it’s critical to range management,” he concludes.

Smiling, Sweet says he’s still counting on a strong *El Niño* to pile on the rain clouds this fall.

Nelson jokes that if it doesn’t rain this year, he’s moving. However, drawing on the experience of those around him, he knows

doing what is best for the herd is best for the pocketbook, and his ranch, too, will survive.

“Doing the right thing is best for a lot of things. You’re doing what’s best for the cows. You’re doing what’s best for your bottom line. We’re doing what’s best for the land,” he asserts.

On a side note, he adds, “I was talking to a cow guy this winter, kind of worried about the rain. I said, ‘You think it’s going to rain?’ And he answered, ‘It always does.’”



**Editor’s Note:** *Paige Nelson is a freelance writer and a cattlegirl from Rigby, Idaho. Photographer Kelli Toledo of Visalia, Calif., has been a member of the American Angus Association since 1976.*