

DEALING WITH DROUGHT

Toxic Plants Pose Livestock Threat During Drought

Toxic range plants can become a serious threat to livestock during a drought, warns North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension rangeland management specialist Kevin Sedivec.

A few of these toxic plants are very deadly. They can kill an animal in less than a day.

Most toxic plants found in pastures are unpalatable, which means livestock won't eat them under normal conditions, Sedivec says. However, during a drought, the more palatable forages mature and dry up early, making the poisonous plants more available for livestock to eat. The toxic plants often have root systems that can reach water deep in the ground, so they stay green longer, which makes them doubly attractive to livestock.

Also, producers inadvertently may help toxic plants poison livestock. In drought conditions, producers need forage, so they hay around sloughs. But wetlands are where plants with the highest toxicity grow, Sedivec says.

So far, within North Dakota, toxic plants pose the greatest danger in south-central and west-central regions, areas that are extremely dry this year.

The state has about a dozen broadleaf plant species that are toxic to livestock. The worst are:

• **Water hemlock.** It's found throughout the state and is one of the most poisonous

plants in the United States. It's found in wetland areas. The root and bottom part of the plant are the most toxic. Livestock can die within an hour of eating even a small amount.

• **Arrowgrass.** It is found in southeastern North Dakota and grows best in soil covered with water. It mainly affects cattle and sheep. The leaves, which contain hydrocyanic acid, are the most toxic part.

• **Locoweed.** It grows throughout the state. It is slightly more palatable than other toxic plants, so livestock are more likely to eat it. The plant affects horses more than cattle. It also poisons sheep and goats. It can cause death, but it will more likely cause birth defects in livestock.

• **Lupine.** It's found in southwestern and western North Dakota in sagebrush and aspen areas. It causes birth defects. Sheep are particularly susceptible to it.

• **Chokecherry.** It grows throughout the state in areas where moisture is plentiful. Livestock will eat the leaves and twigs, but the animals must consume a large quantity before they're poisoned. This plant also contains hydrocyanic acid.

Sedivec says an even more common danger during droughts is nitrate poisoning from certain range weeds that accumulate large concentrations of nitrate in dry conditions (see "Potential High for Nitrate and Prussic Acid Poisoning," page 274). While nitrate is usually not toxic to animals,

it can cause problems such as abortions and death at high levels.

Three types of broadleaf weeds — lamb's-quarter, kochia and goosefoot — are the primary concern.

"They are extremely common in pastureland throughout the state," Sedivec says.

These weeds also are somewhat palatable to livestock. Cattle deaths occur from nitrate poisoning during every drought, he says.

During drought, Sedivec advises livestock producers to:

- ▶ Minimize overgrazing to limit the livestock's contact with toxic plants. To minimize overgrazing, wean young livestock early and use a rotational grazing system to lessen the effects on any one pasture. If necessary, find additional pasture or supplement the livestock feed. If overgrazing is the only option, check pastures for toxic plants and try to keep livestock away from them.
- ▶ Try to avoid toxic plants when haying wetland areas.
- ▶ Contact your veterinarian if you have a sick or dead animal.
- ▶ Take advantage of the FeedList, an NDSU database listing producers with feed to sell, at www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/feedlist.

Editor's Note: Article provided by NDSU Extension.

BeefTalk: Grazing plan eliminates need for panic button

Around mid-June to early July, Mother Nature usually kicks summer into gear. The first noticeable symptom in the upper Great Plains is an increase in temperature and a decrease in moisture.

Determining if a drought is in progress or whether one is simply experiencing good haying weather is a thin line. A concern, however, surfaces that livestock feed may be in short supply. Panic may be too harsh of a word, but some producers do panic.

Before the panic button is pushed, some simple principles need to be noted. If a grazing system is not in place, now is the time for action.

Go see a grazing specialist and get a plan started. The North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension service or Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), located in almost every county in the country, could help a producer get started.

A decade of poor grazing management will take several grazing seasons to correct so that normal production can occur. Operations that have effective grazing systems in place are in a position to manage through dry times as well as wet times without upsetting the focused direction of the ranch operation.

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