Restocking Considerations

Cattle producers have many options to weigh when restocking.

*by **Kasey Brown**, associate editor*

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Many areas of the country are still reeling from the aftereffects, or current effects, of drought, though the cattle market's all-time high prices have some producers considering restocking. The question is whether it's the right time to buy.

The answer lies in the amount of risk cattlemen are willing to take, says Ron Gill, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension professor and extension livestock specialist.

The common management strategy with periodic drought is to sell the older, productive cows and keep the younger females, says Gill, but cattlemen often don't think of all the ramifications. Keeping all of the younger females requires much more upkeep.

"They are less productive, they wean lighter calves, they have lower reproductive rates and they have lower rebreeding rates than some of these older cows would, and it takes more nutrition to keep them in a productive state," he explains.

He says this to urge producers to think outside the box, not to scare them from retaining heifers. There are considerations to keep in mind in deciding to keep older cows or buy/keep replacement heifers. These include known price and availability of quality females, perceived or real advantages in genetic and production potential, and the total costs of developing retained heifers. Herd biosecurity and predictability of production potential should also be kept in mind.

If it turns out to be an extended drought, he adds, those older cows could end up being pretty old. If the drought ends up being a short-lived drought, he says keeping younger heifers and feeding them through may be the better option. Unfortunately, there is no crystal ball on the amount of rainfall an area will receive.

However, there are tools available to producers to help reach that decision.

Determining stocking rate

"The stocking rate is the most critical decision in rebuilding," Gill stresses. Texas AgriLife Extension recently released a

Table 1: Summary of 16 female replacement alternatives and 11 genetic, economic and management factors for each

	Quantity/ quality available	Initial investment	Development phase	Rebreed potential	Market flexibility	Genetic potential	Potential longevity	Dystocia/ death loss	
Retain heifers	H	M/H	Long	M	H	H	H	M	
1) Heifers < 700 lb.	H	L	Long	L	H	L	H	H	
2) Heifers > 700 lb.	H	L	M	L	H	M	H	H	
3) Bred heifers	M	M/H	None	L	L	M	H	H	
4) First-calf pairs	M	H	None	L	L	M	H	H	
5) Three-in-ones, 2 yrs.	L	H	None	L/H	L	M	H	M	
6) Bred cows, 3-6 yrs.	L	M/H	None	M/H	L	M	M/H	L	
7) Pairs, 3-6 yrs.	L	H	None	M/H	L	M	M	L	
8) Three-in-ones, 3-6 yrs.	L	H	None	H	L	M	M	L	
9) Bred cows, 7 or older	M	M	None	M	L	M	L	L	
10) Pairs, 7 or older	M	M/H	None	M	L	M	L	L	
11) Three-in-ones, 7 or older	M	H	None	M	L	M	L	L	
12) Open, 2 yrs.	L/M	L/M	M	M	L	M	H	M	
13) Open, 3-6 yrs.	L	L/M	M	H	M	M	L	L	
14) Open, 7 or older	M	L	M	M	M	M	L	L	
15) Stocker cows	H	L	M	L	M	M	L	M	

Note: Unless otherwise stated H=High, M=Moderate and L=Low

Source: Evaluating Replacement Female Alternatives, by Gill, Bever and Pinchak.

smartphone app called Stocking Rate Calculator for Grazing Livestock, or GrazingCalc.

The description explains its uses, "One of the most common problems livestock managers deal with is having too many animals on the land. Being overstocked beyond what the land can handle may lead to overgrazing, resulting in issues such as decreased forage production, erosion problems and degraded wildlife habitat. GrazingCalc allows the user to quickly and easily calculate a correct stocking rate for your property based on the measured forage production. GrazingCalc can apply to cattle, horses, sheep and goats. The tool also allows you to change the number of animals and grazing months based on estimated available forage."

Gill notes that an animal unit is the consumption of 26 pounds (lb.) of dry matter, and it is the equivalent of what a 1,000-lb. to 1,100-lb. female with calf might eat. If your females are 1,400 lb.-1,700 lb., you must account for the extra consumption of feed and forage.

He also says to know what your forage availability is and how it would be used — for instance, whether a cattleman is a seasonal grazier or a yearlong grazier.

"You need to monitor how much forage you have at certain points in the year. There are key points in the year where you have to look at what forage is available, the rainfall pattern, and what is the chance of growing any more forage," Gill explains.

"A lot of people go on historical production, but right now, we're just not getting that kind of forage production. Rainfall patterns are not coming at the typical times. There needs to be more closely monitored forage production, and cattlemen need to let the forage stay ahead of the stocking rate," he recommends. "It's better to waste a little forage than to have to feed stock."

Give drought-stressed forage at least a year to recover, and two years would be better to establish regrowth, he says. The market is indicating that it is a good time to get back in the business, but he warns that if it goes dry again, cattlemen could lose more money by having to sell those new females again.

For help on monitoring forage or deciding stocking rates, he says any state's extension service has forage-production and stocking-rate guides. An extension agent can help determine the stocking rate that an individual operation's forage can sustain.

"I think being on the conservative side to get back in will be a wise strategy," Gill notes, but grants that the decision is up to the individual, and risks can certainly be taken.

Female alternatives

If you decide to purchase replacements, he suggests going somewhere where the markets aren't the best to look at all of your options. Don't be afraid to go outside your production areas to restock, but make sure the new cattle can adapt to their new environment.

It is important to consider all of the options. He offers 15 alternatives, in addition to keeping your own replacement heifers, to consider.

1. Heifers less than 700 lb. — open heifers requiring development
2. Heifers more than 700 lb. — open heifers ready to be bred
3. Bred heifers — bred heifers confirmed by palpation
4. First-calf pairs — heifers with a first calf nursing at side, but not exposed to rebreeding
5. Three-in-ones, 2 years old — heifers with first calf at side and bred safely
6. Bred cows, 3-6 years old — bred cows confirmed by palpation
7. Pairs, 3-6 years old — cows with nursing calf at side, but not exposed to rebreeding
8. Three-in-ones, 3-6 years old — cows with nursing calf at side and bred safely
9. Bred cows, 7 years old or older — pregnant aged cows confirmed by palpation
10. Pairs, 7 years old or older — cows with nursing calf at side, but not exposed for rebreeding
11. Three-in-ones, 7 years old or older — cows with nursing calf at side and bred safely
12. Opens, 2 years old — young females, which may or may not have had a calf
13. Opens, 3-6 years old — cows in good condition, but not bred
14. Opens, 7 years old or older — cows in good condition, but not bred
15. Stocker cows — thin cows of unknown pregnancy or age

Each of these options has factors affecting genetic, economic and management decisions. In addition to age of the female, availability of quantity and quality, initial investment expense, development phase, rebreeding potential, flexibility in marketing of extras or culls, predictability of genetic potential, potential longevity, dystocia/death loss, weaning weight of first calf, nutritional requirements, and cull rate.

In terms of investment, the options with the greatest initial investment would be the pairs and the three-in-one packages, especially in the younger groups. He says bred females can usually be bought at a reasonable price, though bred heifers of high quality would be priced much higher. The initial investment could offset or exacerbate the development phase. Younger females will take more investment to develop to productive age and condition.

Females must be able to produce calves to pay their way, and younger females have a greater risk of failing to rebreed. Cows that have already gone through their second successful breeding can be considered at least a moderate potential for rebreeding, he adds.

Flexibility in marketing isn't often thought of in replacement-heifer selection, though he emphasizes that it makes a significant difference in the actual cost of those cattle left in inventory. If the extras or culls would be sold for a loss, the expense needs to be allocated to those remaining to make up the true purchase cost.

"Do not get locked into one option, consider each alternative that fits your operation every year. Market changes may affect the most feasible scenario from one year to the next year. Once that budget process is in place, quick analyses of options are possible.

"Do not hesitate to purchase a seemingly expensive alternative up front if it pencils out to have the greatest potential for long-term economic benefit. Likewise, do not purchase expensive alternatives when they clearly will not produce the desired economic returns and sustainability of the ranching enterprise," he concluded.

For more help on restocking considerations, Gill recommends visiting *http://animalscience.tamu.edu/academics/beef/rebuilding/*.

	Weaning weights	Nutrition required	Cull rate
	M	H	M
	L	H	H
	L	H	H
	L	H	H
	L/M	H	H
	M	H	M
	H	L	L/M
	H	L	L/M
	H	L	L/M
	M/H	L	M/H
	M/H	L	M/H
	M/H	L	M/H
	M	M	M
	H	L	M
	M/H	L	M/H
	L	M	H