

Drought Management



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

Mistakes

Texas livestock specialist offers practical tips for avoiding common mistakes in managing the beef enterprise during drought.

by **Troy Smith**

There is a story about a man who was better at raising children than calves on his drought-afflicted ranch. According to the tale, it was this rancher's habit to go outside each evening and gaze wishfully at the clear, starry sky. One night, after studying the horizon, he gathered pebbles in a bucket and began throwing handfuls on the roof of his family's house. This prompted the rancher's good wife to come out, demanding to know what had prompted such curious behavior.

"There is lightning in the west, and it might rain. Surely, if not tonight, it will rain eventually," the rancher is said to have replied. "I thought it would be a good idea for the kids to get accustomed to hearing something fall on the roof. Then, when it does rain, they won't spook and stampede."

Maybe that story really isn't so far-fetched. There are parts of cow country where drought has lingered so long that small children have had few chances to hear rain on the roof. For a while now, it's been seldom

heard in some southeastern, southwestern and far-western states. There is a parched patch of real estate in the Great Lakes region, and even parts of Hawaii are abnormally dry. As this is written, Texas is suffering most.

Supposedly, Texas is the origin of that little anecdote about the rancher "preconditioning" his children for the eventual coming of rain. It's also the stomping grounds for Texas AgriLife Extension Livestock Specialist Ron Gill. He grew up in a ranching

area of the state that, on average, records 14 inches (in.) of precipitation annually. Gill claims, however, that it has been known to come in just two rain events.

"Where I come from, the climate is best described as perpetual drought, with intermittent flooding," Gill quips.

In a country where scarcity of rain is normal, and periods of even drier weather come all too frequently, it seems like cattle producers ought to be pretty drought-savvy.

But regardless of location, every producer in business for the long haul will experience drought. All should have a plan for coping with the consequence — reduced forage production. Certainly, some producers do have drought strategies. Others take steps that Gill considers shortsighted or just plain wrong. Too often their decisions may actually undermine the sustainability of their operations.

A realistic plan

According to Gill, a realistic plan for surviving severe drought should include measures to reduce forage demand. That means removing cattle. Usually, it means selling some cattle. If the operation manages yearlings as well as cows, yearlings can be liquidated to save forage for the breeding herd. If it's strictly a cow outfit, though, significantly reducing cow numbers can be a bitter pill to swallow. But, realizing cattle numbers must be reduced, producers may choose to wean early, sell the calves and hope conditions improve so cows don't have to be sold.

"I believe that's a mistake," Gill says.

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“Selling lightweight calves under six months of age will not save a significant amount of forage. Those calves only consume 15% to 25% as much forage as their dams. And lightweight calves will likely be of low value when marketed during widespread drought conditions.”

Early weaning can be a management tool for reducing the cow nutrient requirement and boosting cow body condition. While it won't help stretch the forage supply very much, it can minimize cow supplement costs. When considering early weaning, Gill says, retaining ownership of calves should also be considered. Feeding the calves is cheaper than supplementing nursing cows.

Another common mistake, Gill adds, is to sell the wrong cows. When ranchers do decide to reduce breeding herd numbers, they typically sell the older cows. That often includes culling cows 5 to 7 years old in favor of retaining heifers and the very youngest cows.

“But first- and second-calvers are less productive,” Gill explains. “They generally wean the lightest calves, and rebreeding rates are lower. The middle-aged cows are probably more environmentally adapted and able to survive the drought better. Their calves generally are heavier, generating more income. And their future daughters saved as replacements are likely to be better adapted, too.”

When faced with drought-driven reduction of a spring-calving herd, for example, Gill recommends the culling start with any cows that do not have calves at side. Candidates for early culling should also include replacement heifers not already in production. Additional culling should be based on soundness of teeth, feet, legs and udders. Then look for cows with marginal production histories.

Perhaps the worst mistake made by ranchers is to do nothing but wait, hoping the drought will break in time or that additional pasture can be leased. Sometimes, a rancher

tries to maintain cow numbers and buy feed, or sell part of the cows to purchase feed for the remainder.

“At the end of the drought, you are out of money and out of cattle,” Gill states. “When cattle are sold the money should be put aside to purchase replacements at the end of the drought.”

Danger in overstocking

Gill believes the majority of commercial cow-calf producers cannot afford to buy feed to survive a drought or an overstocked ranch. In his experience, most who have tried did not survive unless they were able to infuse substantial amounts of outside money.

“Because many ranchers are afraid a blade of grass might go to waste, their ranches are overstocked anyway. Don't try to push the envelope to the limit,” Gill warns, adding that “wait-and-see” management can decrease the short- and long-term productivity of

a ranch's forage base. He believes one of the best drought management strategies is to stock a ranch at a moderate level, which allows more reaction time and more opportunities to take in cattle and income when times are good.

Gill also warns that hanging on too long reduces cattle marketing options. Local cattle markets decline during periods of drought, while feed prices climb. Delayed destocking usually results in lower net income.

“My recommended approach to drought is to sell cattle and sell early. Try to sell enough cows, or yearlings, early enough that you don't have to sell more for a year. If you manage your forage well, eventually you can try to buy back cattle before the price gets high,” Gill states. “Think long-term. The next 15 years are predicted to be drier than normal in many areas. Manage accordingly, and don't be surprised.”

