

Grazing Strategies During Drought

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While not everyone in the state is experiencing drought right now, we have all experienced drought in the past and we will all experience it again. The following are a few tips and suggestions for reducing drought related impact on the land. While we can't control the weather we can work with what we have to minimize future problems.

Feeding hay or supplementing?

If you are going to feed or supplement you have a few options to reduce negative impacts on drought stricken plants. If you cannot remove livestock from pasture or rangeland you can establish a smaller sacrifice area. While this area will be damaged and not usable as grazing land for the rest of the year, if not longer, it will reduce wider negative impact.

If you must keep your livestock on pasture or rangeland, move the place you are feeding them every few days, if not daily. This will reduce prolonged and repeated animal impact on struggling plants. Keeping livestock in one place during drought can cause too much impact on plants by opening up the crown and weakening the plant.

What about weeds and poisonous plants?

Did you have problems before the drought or are weeds and poisonous plants more of a problem as a result of the drought? While there may be confounding issues contributing to individual weed or poisonous plant issues, drought can intensify these issues and if the area is grazed too hard weeds and poisonous plants can become problems after drought. Remember this as you create and implement grazing plans during a drought.

Were some areas grazed harder last year?

Be cautious on areas that had greater livestock impact in previous years as these plants may need more resources and time to recover compared to areas that were grazed lightly. During a normal precipitation year grazing heavily or even severe won't affect the plants if only done once, but plants will be negatively impacted if they can't recover due to drought or if livestock are brought back to the area before plants have had time to recover.

What about when plants are dormant vs actively growing?

When plants have gone dormant they can withstand heavier grazing. This is because they aren't constantly attempting to re-grow what has been grazed. Keep this in mind because as the year progresses you may be able to graze when plants have gone dormant. The plants most stressed by drought will be those that are grazed during the growing season or too soon after much needed rain. This is because they were unable to recover from stress due to lack of moisture.

Beware of grazing even dormant plants too much. Maintain enough plant material and litter on the ground to keep soil erosion to a minimum.

If plants are growing, but stressed rotate more frequently. You will need to be extra aware of how much recovery time is necessary if the plants are stressed. Remember recovery time may be much longer than usual in a prolonged drought.

You have a few options on how you manage your livestock, but what can you do to reduce the amount of forage you need to support your livestock?

Can you graze elsewhere or feed something else?

With less production you will either need more acreage or another location. Irrigated pasture can give you more grazing when non irrigated sites are less productive. Moving livestock to another location is another option that should be considered. [Factsheet no. 1.626 “Alternative Feeds for Cattle During Drought”](#) can be also be a helpful resource.

Culling?

Reducing numbers or selling off replacements you may have kept in wetter years could be a good option. Be sure to do cost analysis mentioned below.

Consider the cost of each option, especially reducing numbers. Help with cost analysis and other drought resources can be found on the [Drought Management page](#) of the CSU Extension Agriculture and Business Management website.

Keeping drought related damage to your land at a minimum in times of drought will reduce the lasting affects of drought in the future and help you maintain more productive pastures or rangelands.