



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Drought and Other Natural Disasters Section

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Drought Management Strategies for Beef Cattle

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Drought develops progressively over time. Management of the ranch during a drought depends on the balance between stocking density and the availability of feed and water.

In the long run, you can help protect your interests by sound planning to make your ranch decisions less sensitive to drought. Early decisions need to be based on what relief measures are potentially available on the ranch. Among the important factors are:

- Guessing the expected duration of the drought,
- The current water and feed inventories,
- The body condition of the cowherd, and
- Financial resources available.

During drought, decisions may often be made on emotion rather than logic. The main goal is to make objective decisions and get skilled help when necessary from your extension educator, beef specialist, range specialist, or agricultural consultant.

Effect of Drought on Range Plants and Management

Drought is a serious obstacle to successful range livestock management. Producers must understand how drought affects plants, grazing animals, and livestock management, and what options exist. Forage production is decreased dramatically, but reductions are less on range in good and excellent ecological condition.

The ability of perennial plants to recover after drought is closely related to their vigor before and during the drought. Excessive grazing (more than 60 percent of current year's growth) decreases the ability of some plants to recover. Moderate use (25 to 55 percent) does not seem to affect the recovery rate.

A drought may require that livestock numbers be reduced according to forage supply. Retaining a rotational

grazing system during drought is recommended over continuous grazing because periodic rest helps plants maintain vigor. Concentrating more animals into a single herd is recommended over having several smaller herds because by having more animals in a pasture, the entire pasture will be grazed more uniformly, and more use will be made of the less-preferred plants. Other options include grazing Crested wheat grass earlier and longer than normal, because it is one of the plants most tolerant of grazing.

Another option is keeping cattle on irrigated or sub-irrigated sites longer than usual. Fertilizer could be used to increase forage production on many of these sites. Fertilizer is a cash cost, however, and soils should be tested before fertilizer is applied. Fertilizer needs moisture to be available to the plant, and in times of extreme drought, this may not happen.

Initial Questions

The producers who survive best during drought are those who adopt sound management and financial plans and review them regularly. They make firm decisions, and act quickly and early.

Keep alert for opportunities such as leasing land instead of buying feed. Four factors that affect risk management during a drought include:

1. The total population of cattle in relation to feed availability,
2. How widespread the drought-area is,
3. The time of year and the likelihood of rain and return to adequate feed supplies in your area, and
4. Evaluation of cash flow needs (borrowing your way through a drought to maintain traditional herd size may inhibit long term profitability).