

General Management Options for Drought

Dry conditions throughout the state are leaving many cattle producers pondering, “What am I going to do?” The cold spring followed by dry, then hot weather, has resulted in less than ideal hay production plus a shortage of grazing. In some counties, producers have begun to realize this problem and are beginning to weigh their options. If you are wondering what options a cattle producer has, here are just a few.

The first option to consider is culling poor-performing cows. Cattle prices, although declining a little into the summer months, are still strong. Removing older, less productive cows, cows that produce lightweight calves, or cows that have temperament or structural problems may be the first step at combating drought by reducing the stocking rate. Also, large cows aren’t always the most productive cows in the herd but usually require more land area to maintain them. Culling excessively large cows can help alleviate grazing pressure.

Early weaning spring-born calves is another option. Removal of calves from their dams will greatly reduce the cow’s maintenance requirement. The energy requirement for a dry beef cow is about 15% less than the requirement of a cow in mid-lactation. Although early weaning reduces the maintenance requirement, the impact on grazing pressure will be less pronounced than culling unproductive cows and the amount of available forage plus body condition should be watched closely to ensure the herd doesn’t begin to thin. Another important consideration for early weaning is feeding and(or) marketing the weaned calves.

Spring born calves should be approaching four months of age. These calves will have a functional rumen by now and should be easier to manage nutritionally. If early weaning calves are in a stressful situation, utilizing a medicated weaning ration will be beneficial in reducing health problems. These lightweight calves require a nutrient dense diet and most likely will necessitate the need to purchase concentrate feed. As long as the cost to put on a pound of gain is less than the value of added weight gain, calves can be retained and developed to a heavier weight in a dry lot. With the potential of a hay shortage and feed by-products such as corn gluten feed and soybean hulls being an economical source of nutrients, consider utilizing more grains and by-products and less forage in developing the calves. With the favorable steer:corn price ratio, an attentive producer could make money at feeding the calves.

Supplying feed grains to the grazing herd will also help alleviate grazing pressure on pastures. Providing feed at one percent of body weight or greater can be effective at substituting for forages, which will help alleviate some grazing pressure. Feeding high levels of low quality feedstuffs such as a rice mill feed or cottonseed hulls as a forage substitute should be avoided because they will likely result in a loss of body condition and normally are expensive sources of energy because of their low level of digestibility. Drought conditions not only result in reduced forage quantity but quality will decline as well. It is not recommended to utilize salt for a free-choice feed intake limiter because salt will stimulate water intake and drinking water, like forage, can become a limited resource during drought.

Placing the cattle in a dry lot (small lot with limitations to little or no grazing access) and programmed feeding a high grain or by-product based, nutrient dense diet is another option. The goal of this option is to supply the necessary pounds of protein and energy the cow requires daily in a small nutrient dense diet. These diets will supply all of the cow's nutritional needs long before she is full. For example, supplying only 16 lbs of an 80% concentrate diet can meet the energy requirement of a mid-gestation, non-lactating cow. Under normal conditions, the cow would be expected to consume about 26 pounds or more. Program feeding definitely isn’t for every producer. The program-fed diet must

contain enough blended in roughage to keep the rumen healthy and enough feed bunks are needed to ensure all cows get their share. Utilizing Rumensin or other ionophores in the diet can be beneficial at improving the feed conversion of this type diet as well. Based on current feed prices, a nutrient dense, 20% roughage diet fed at 16 pounds per day will cost approximately \$0.75 per head. This cost will vary depending on available feedstuffs and source. Care must be taken when adapting cattle to these types of diets to prevent digestive disorders.

Cattle can also be placed on a complete ration that does not restrict intake. In this situation, the ration can take advantage of either roughage alternatives such as cottonseed hulls or rice-mill feed to lower the energy level of the diet. This type of ration also permits free-choice feeding but will be more expensive than the previously mentioned practice of programmed feeding a diet that is highly nutrient dense.

The final method is to start looking for hay. This method was saved for last because with hay being scarce and current fuel prices, shipping will make the nutritional value of hay very expensive relative to by-product feeds and grains. It is often mentioned during droughty condition that producers should purchase hay, but during drought, who has extra hay to sell?

For more information on managing the cow herd during drought conditions, contact your local county Extension office. For sample feed rations and feeding programs mentioned in this article, visit the beef nutrition website at <http://www.aragriculture.org/livestock/beef/nutrition/default.htm>. Drought management feeding program examples can be found under nutrition and feeding frequently asked questions. In addition, if looking for hay or have hay for sale, visit the hay database at http://www.aragriculture.org/forage_pasture.htm.