by Kris Ringwall, beef specialist, NDSU Extension Service

chaps@ndsuext.nodak.edu

Start Planning Now If the Summer Looks Dry

Drought and excess moisture are very frequent concerns in the agricultural community. This year appears to be moving in the direction of dryness.

Agricultural producers often experience feelings of uncertainty that are sourced in many day-to-day issues. The biggest uncertainty is the weather. Those operations that push the limit for production will experience greater uncertainty than those that target production to the long-term average.

A long-term grazing plan is critical for surviving the beef business. My two-plus decades of experiences at the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) taught me the ability to survive drought is directly dependent on rangeland usage that follows appropriate and correct stocking rates.

The other day, while I was visiting with fellow North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension Service livestock specialists, the lack of moisture was a topic of discussion. Generally, people talk about the weather in more of a chit-chat tone. However, this discussion was more than just casual talk to pass the time. Dry weather certainly affects grain and forage crops, which directly affect livestock.

After arriving home, I tapped on the drought map tab on the Internet. Through the years, I have regularly visited the drought map at *droughtmonitor.unl.edu* because drought is not new. In fact, drought and excess moisture are very frequent concerns in the agricultural community. This year appears to be moving in the direction of dryness.

The drought map indicates some dryness moving into many parts of the country. Granted, weather can change quickly, but the drought monitor always has a lingering touch of drought somewhere. Also, the lack of moisture tends to spread out until replenishing rains come.

The first point when assessing a pending drought impact is to check your stocking rate with the grazing plan. Ranch operations with effective grazing systems in place are in a position to manage through dry and wet periods without upsetting the focused direction of the operation. Having the correct stocking rate is critical.

Like many of the good prediction tools available to cattle producers, the drought map is a product of a working relationship among the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The tool needs to be used and integrated into a cattle operation.

The first point when assessing a pending drought impact is to check your stocking rate with the grazing plan. Ranch operations with effective grazing systems are in a position to manage through dry and wet periods without upsetting the direction of the operation. Having the correct stocking rate is critical.

The local Natural Resources Conservation Service and the local NDSU Extension Service office are excellent resources for obtaining the correct stocking rate based on local soil types. As a starter, keep in mind a basic assumption that roughly 30 pounds of dry matter per day is needed for a 1,200-lb. cow, whether she is grazing or being fed out of a haystack. These are rough numbers that have a significant cushion for waste and some carryover.

Remember that larger cows need more, while smaller cows need less. Back to the needs of a 1,200-lb. cow: If a producer can only find six months of grazing, then six 1,000-lb. bales are needed to provide a feed base for the nongrazing months.

How many acres per cow per month? To answer the question, each producer needs to visit a range specialist familiar with the local landscape to get the correct number of cow-calf pairs grazing at the proper times.

For example, producers ranching in conditions similar to the DREC and running 1,200-lb. cows could anticipate a range from lowland, with good range conditions and a stocking rate of 1.43 acres per animal unit month, up to 6.88 acres per animal unit month in pastures that are in fair range condition and dry, according to Lee Manske, DREC range specialist.

Typically, DREC upland landscapes that are in good range condition could be stocked at 2.29 acres per animal unit month if the producer is running 1,200-lb. cows, or just less than 14 acres per cow in a very generic sense.

Is this going to be a normal year? Not sure, but the conservative part of me is saying let's do some stocking rate checks and potential yield estimates for the hay land to get the bale counts. The effects of dryness can be mediated, but first localize your needs with your range experts to get a plan.

Herd maintenance requires feed, management and careful input evaluation for cattlemen to survive. **HW**