

Pray for Rain

Hereford breeders in the Southwest are facing tough times of drought.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

“The preacher at our church, anymore, he just says, ‘Thank you for the rain that’s coming,’” Mary Barber says with a mix of determination and sadness in her voice.

Living in a drought tests everyone’s faith. In the Southwest, it’s not a matter of when a drought is going to hit; it’s when, but the past few years have been unrelenting. While people are doing what they can to hang on, at the end of the day, it either rains or it doesn’t. And lately, it doesn’t.

Barber Ranch, Channing, Texas, is one of the nation’s elite seedstock herds. The Barbers have a long list of accomplishments in the showing, and their bulls are sold into some of the best commercial herds around. They are certainly not immune to drought, though, and it’s been devastating to both cattle and morale.

“The dirt blows all the time,” says Mary Barber, matriarch of the Barber family. “It blew from the north yesterday and today

it’s going to blow out of the southwest. There are sand dunes everywhere. Dryland wheat that we would normally winter on doesn’t exist. What little grass we had, if the cattle haven’t stomped it or eaten it, the wind breaks it off. Basically there’s no cover on our pasture. We feed breeder’s cubes and hay, which seems to make the birth weights higher, so calving is harder. Conception rates are down, because everything is all screwed up. When we wean calves, they have to go to a grow yard because



PHOTO BY KYLA COPELAND, FOCUS MARKETING GROUP

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there’s no native grass to run them on. It’s awful.”

All the way out in the sometimes-beautiful state of California, producers aren’t any better off, says Richard Snedden of Snedden Ranch near Maricopa.

“The rain stopped for our section of California last year in late February. It didn’t rain again until just a little bit in late November, but our place didn’t really green up. We got less than an inch of rain,” Snedden explains.

The Snedden Ranch has quite a bit of variation in elevation on the 20,000-acre ranch. Though it’s contiguous, it ranges from 1,000 ft. to 4,700 ft. in elevation. That means quite a difference in “normal” rainfall too.

“This is an arid area. Out here the rain comes in the winter, and we can get by on five inches in the lower country and 10 inches in the high country,” Snedden explains.



In the last year, he estimates they’ve had about 20% of normal rainfall.

“We don’t have irrigation out here, we don’t cut our own hay. We are totally dependent on Mother Nature.”

And being dependent on Mother Nature, at least lately, is an exercise in patience, it seems.

Back to the east, just across the state line into New Mexico from the Barbers, Kyle Perez says the situation is a little better at C&M Herefords, Nara Visa. But to imply

it’s a Godly intervention will insult even the least devout of Christians.

“It’s been dry since the fall, but we were lucky here. We are in an area that got some decent rain in June and July (2013) and we caught some late rains in the fall and grew some grass,” he says.

But C&M has seen hard times as well. “In 2011, we had an all-time record low moisture level, only about three and half inches for the year. Plus, we had unusually dry years in 2009 and 2010,” Perez says.

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— Kyle Perez

Bad or worse options

Sure, drought is a fact of life, but it’s not an easy situation to battle. Ranchers are left selling what’s been years or even generations in the making, or potentially going broke trying to keep them.

Perez, who is relatively young in the business of ranching, has already learned there is no easy answer.

“All I’d say is there’s not a right or wrong answer to what you do or don’t do. If there was a right answer, everybody would know what to do.”

The Perezes have tried several options. In the last 15 years they’ve faced two severe droughts, which left them searching for answers. One option they’ve tried is to ship cattle to somewhere it has rained.

“From 2000 to 2004, we shipped cows to Kansas, then Nebraska, Oklahoma, then Texas then back here,” Perez explains.

Then in 2011, they shipped cows again because of drought, this time to South Dakota. During the growing season of 2011, their area was at an all-time record low of rainfall.

Out of options and not wanting to sell anymore cattle, the Perezes sought pasture elsewhere. The drought was so widespread the closest pasture that wasn’t already leased by other desperate ranchers was in South Dakota, so they shipped five truckloads of spring-calving cows north.

“It always looks greener at the start of the deal,” Perez says. “The country looked good up there and so we ultrasounded all our cows and tried to send the later calving ones. We got really lucky that it was an open winter, but looking back on it, it wasn’t that good of option.”

Unfortunately the future can’t be predicted, and once the cows were on the truck, it stopped raining in South Dakota and started raining in New Mexico.

“It got drier up there than it was here,” Perez says, able to see the irony now that it’s in the past. “We did everything in our power to be good stewards of the land and protect our turf but Mother Nature still showed her upper hand.”

The management the cows received was much different from what the Perez family had agreed upon. Basically drylotted on native grass hay and protein lick tubs, the cows didn’t do well. The calves born there were lighter, and the cows didn’t breed back well.

“We decided to get off to give our pasture some relief,” Perez says. “But when you load cows up and take them somewhere, you lose a whole year of a good calf crop due to acclimation. That’s coming and going.”

The Barbers had a little more successful experience with shipping cattle. But they shipped south.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SARAH SNEDDEN

“We found a place down around Ft. Worth and sent some down there a few years ago. The good news is the heat didn’t seem to bother them. They were so thrilled to see something to eat, it didn’t make any difference,” Barber quips.

But with no improvement in the rangeland at home, the Barbers simply sold those cattle off.

Make it rain

Where irrigation is an option, that can be a lifesaver for a cattleman. “We have winter wheat under a sprinkler,” Barber explains. “So that’s what maintained our fall-calving pairs all winter.”

Perez has some experience with utilizing irrigated cropland for grazing as well. The same year C&M was forced to ship cattle to South Dakota, half of the cows left at home went to corn stalks.

“That was our first time on stalks, and we didn’t have a lot of experience,” Perez admits. “But it turned out to be a good deal. We learned a lot about it. If you do go to stalks, you need to make sure you thoroughly think through the water situation.”

The weather hit a bitter cold snap with a foot or so of snow, and the dirt tank that was being used for water froze solid.

But, for some, crop residues just aren’t an option because there’s no irrigation to be had. The Snedden Ranch is in that boat and has already culled down.

Selling down or selling out

The Snedden Ranch is primarily a cow-calf operation with 80% commercial cows and 20% Hereford and a few Red Angus seedstock. In good years, the ranch also keeps its steer calves and markets them at about 16 months old. So when the drought hit, the first thing to go was stockers. Next older cows were sold. Right now, the ranch has nothing older than 6 years, which puts it at 50 to 60% of its normal stocking rate.

“As soon as we get some rains out here, trying to buy back is going to be interesting with the cow inventory being so low.”

— Richard Snedden

“Some people have already sold completely out of cows,” Snedden says.

But with his son and his family relying on ranch income too, it’s hard to make that choice, Snedden says.

Shipping has been discussed, but because the herd is fall calving, he hates to go north. Everything in the Southern Plains within reasonable distance is suffering from drought too, so the cattle would likely be forced to go all the way to Oklahoma. He’s just not sure if that much freight makes sense.

“We keep thinking it would only take about two more good rains, and if we could just get four more inches, we could probably carry 50% of the cow herd another year,” Snedden says, anxiously. “The problem is, grass doesn’t really grow here except in February, March and April. And we’re already through half of that and we don’t have any soil moisture.”

Waiting for a miracle

He reminisces about the “Miracle March” that occurred in 1991 in his area.

“We hadn’t had rain for more than a year, but when it started raining, it rained for three weeks and we had near normal rainfall. The grass was not great because it all came in three weeks, but it saved us. We had nine inches of rain

in three weeks. Even the people in town called it ‘Miracle March’ because it bailed us all out.”

It’s going to take a miracle — that’s for sure. “We are getting by, barely,” Mary Barber says. We’re fixin’ to wean our fall calves and we will cull really, really hard. We are not planning on keeping any heifers back.”

The bright side to this situation, if there is one, is that the market has been good.

“It’s an unbelievable blessing to be in such a drought and have the market that we have had,” Snedden says. “Commercial pairs are selling from anywhere from \$1,400 to \$2,000 a pair.”

Of course, that’s the kind of thing that leaves you with a sick feeling in your gut when you’re in the business for the long-term.

“As soon as we get some rains out here, trying to buy back is going to be interesting with the cow inventory being so low,” Snedden admits.

And selling all their heifers isn’t easy for the Barbers, knowing those are likely going to make some of the best cows they’ve ever raised.

There’s not much else to say, Barber admits. It’s a tough situation with no relief in sight.

The Barbers are thankful that some government programs will pay out this year, though Barber says it’s expected to pay about \$100 per cow for the last two years, or \$200 total per cow. She figures they spend \$760 a year just to maintain a cow, which makes that \$200 seem like a drop in the bucket. If the money were water, it would hardly make mud in the bottom of their dusty bucket.

“It’s better than nothing,” Barber says, half-heartedly.

All three of these families have been in the cow business for three generations, but this drought, no doubt, tests their love of the land.

After all, drought is a natural disaster that requires faith, patience and perseverance to overcome. It’s a good time to remember the old adage: “It always rains at the end of a drought.” **HW**