

Coming Out of Drought

Even with rain, the recovery of pastures takes time. A unique website offers tools to develop your ranch's own drought plan.

by Kindra Gordon

What's the key to getting pastures back on track after drought? The answer according to most grazing management experts — and seasoned ranchers — is patience.

Because the health and vigor of most drought-affected plants is decreased, these pastures are going to need more than just rain to recover — they also need time and TLC.

During the growing season, rotating cattle through pastures and then allowing ample time for those pastures to rest and regrow is always a good management strategy, especially so after drought.

In the fall, if it's possible, moving cattle to crop residues to give pastures even more rest is also advised.

As well, University of Nebraska Forage Specialist Bruce Anderson has some advice. He suggests feeding hay a bit longer in next spring before turning cows out to permanent pasture.

Anderson explains this strategy, saying, "I know this action is exactly opposite of my usual

recommendation to graze more and feed less hay. But, allowing pastures to accumulate a bit more growth before grazing begins will provide more total grazable forage. Leftover hay also can be used later during the grazing season to give pastures more time to recover between grazings."

Another strategy Anderson likes to allow drought affected pastures recovery time is planting drought-tolerant

forages for pasture or hay. Summer annual grasses like Sudan grass, sorghum-Sudan grass hybrids and pearl millet are excellent choices.

Wait until soils are good and warm before planting these grasses, Anderson cautions, and says, "Late May or early June usually is best."

He adds that these grasses could also be planted as a

double crop into the stubble after wheat harvest.

While fertilizer costs money, on more productive pastures, it may be worth the investment to help jump start them after drought — but be sure to conduct a soil fertility test to know what is needed.

Weeds can also be problematic after drought — especially if pastures were overgrazed. Grazing or mowing weeds before seed set can help knock them back. Or, if they are aggressive, you may need to consider spraying.

Plan, plan, plan

Most important, as you come through the drought, discuss what you've learned and devise a plan for the next drought — it will return.

"What you do before drought is what helps

you survive drought," is the consensus of several Great Plains cattle ranchers who have shared their "drought strategies" on the drought planning website available at drought.unl.edu/ranchplan.

The website was launched during the summer of 2011 by the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It features tabs titled "Before Drought," "During Drought," "After Drought."

Tonya Haigh, a rural sociologist with the NDMC, says the Center's mission is to help lessen drought's impacts on society. She explains that the U.S. Drought Monitor map and the Drought Impact Reporter — a site that archives drought-related news and individual producer reports — are both tools already offered by NDMC. Now, the website adds another facet to help ranchers create a written plan of their specific strategies to manage drought.

Haigh shares that a common mistake landowners make with drought is a lack of planning. She says, "Human nature with regard to drought is to be aware,

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— Welch Ranch



then become concerned, then panic as drought intensifies — but once it rains, people tend to return to apathy.”

Instead of crisis management, Haigh and the NDMC team stress that producers should approach drought with preparedness and risk management strategies.

“Planning, monitoring and prediction before drought can often lessen the severity of the impact of the drought,” says Haigh.

Online planning tool developed

Over the last decade, the NDMC has conducted producer surveys and interviews on how ranchers were affected by drought and what management methods they felt were most beneficial to the sustainability of their ranch operations.

“Most producers did think that their management methods helped them get through the drought,” shares Haigh. Management steps like stockpiling hay, being flexible with herd size and having water developments on their land were cited as beneficial.

But, she adds that the producers also emphasized that there is no magic bullet during drought. Of this, Haigh says, “Definitely everyone’s situation and plans differ.

Based on the input provided by producers, the Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch website was created with the aim of educating ranchers about drought and providing a format to develop their own individual ranch plans — with strategies before, during and after drought.

Funding for the website is provided from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Risk Management Agency with collaborators from the NDMC, South Dakota State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Texas A&M-Kingsville.

Materials on the site are generally applicable to the Great Plains region — from Texas to North Dakota.

Haigh notes that the “Write a Plan” section on the website includes seven specific steps to assist ranchers with the process. These include forming a planning team that also considers conservation and financial expertise. Additionally, the vision and strategic objectives of the ranch must be considered as the drought plan is developed.

Sample drought plans from eight Great Plains ranching operations are also included in the “Write a Plan” section on the site. Haigh says, “I think the lessons shared in these real life examples are one of the most helpful parts of the website.”

Haigh notes that these eight case studies share their critical dates and the target conditions

they monitor during the year. Haigh says each landowner stresses how important it has been to have such dates. “A common recommendation that kept coming up from landowners and drought advisors as we put together this website was that the earlier producers make decisions and adjust stocking rates during drought, the better.”

Lessons learned

One of the featured case studies on the Managing Drought website is that of the Welch Ranch from southern Colorado. Of their lessons learned, the Welches share: “You cannot drought proof a ranch. You can help and you can delay the effects and you can minimize them, but you can’t drought proof your ranch.”

Haigh concurs. She adds, “The landowners we’ve surveyed emphasize that the planning you do early is definitely beneficial. This website is focused on defining drought options before, during and after drought happens.” She adds, “Then if your monitoring indicates a drought situation, the plan is there and the stress and uncertainty has less of an impact on your decision.” **HW**

Editor’s Note: Access the *Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch* website at drought.unl.edu/ranchplan. The *U.S. Drought Monitor map* is available at droughtmonitor.unl.edu and the *Drought Impact Reporter* is available at droughtreporter.unl.edu.



UNL offers a comprehensive drought risk management website.

How do ranchers deal with drought?

Rural sociologist Tonya Haigh acknowledges that every ranch is unique and different. But through research conducted by the National Drought Mitigation Center, she says there are some commonalities among ranchers who have been successful at mitigating the effects of drought on their ranches. What are their strategies? Haigh shares this list:

- They know how much forage they are capable of producing, how much rainfall it takes to produce that forage and what their forage demand is throughout the year.
- They build flexibility into their systems.
- They manage to improve the health of their rangeland resources.
- They track rainfall and monitor their forage production.
- They know when in the year they have to make decisions about stocking rates, and they stick to those dates.
- They know what they are going to do if their precipitation or forage levels tell them that they need to adjust the stocking rates.
- They think about the long-term health of their resources and the long-term financial management of their operations. **HW**