

PARCHED – Drought Persists

La Niña-driven drought continues for many U.S. cattle producers through the winter.

by Katie Maupin Miller

Widespread drought impacted more than two-thirds of the nation's cow herd the last week of November, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. The current drought event is the longest contiguous drought covering more than 40% of the U.S. in modern times — nearly doubling the previous record of 68 weeks set by the 2012-13 drought (Figure 1).

Cow herds in Nebraska, California, Kentucky and Utah were parched with 100% of the respective state's cattle in drought conditions, followed by 99% of Idaho's cattle facing drought. Drought conditions were also drying up forage buying options with 60% of American hay acreage experiencing drought,

according to the same U.S. Drought Monitor. As producers weigh their options of wintering or selling some of their current cow herd, widespread, extreme drought continues across much of the West, the Great Basin and the central-to-southern Great Plains, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts relief won't come this winter.

Triple-dip La Niña

This winter marks the third consecutive year La Niña impacted U.S. weather, creating warmer-than-average temperatures from the Southwest along the Gulf Coast and into the eastern seaboard. NOAA's U.S. Winter Outlook predicts more of the same with drier-than-average

Figure 1: Longest Streaks of U.S. Drought Coverage > 40%

114 weeks (Sep. 29, 2020 – Nov. 29, 2022)
68 weeks (Jun. 19, 2012 – Oct. 1, 2013)
65 weeks (Mar. 12, 2002 – Jun. 3, 2003)

conditions expected across the South through February 2023.

“The single largest factor driving the drought of 2020-22 is La Niña. This will be the third consecutive winter (2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23) featuring La Niña, which has been termed a ‘triple-dip’ event,” says Brad Rippey, USDA meteorologist. “Since the mid-20th century, this has only happened two other times, from 1973-76 and 1998-2001.”

Cattlemen and cattle women in the western U.S. have faced ongoing drought challenges throughout the 21st-century. “Drought has become more common in recent decades from the Pacific Coast to the Plains,” Rippey says. “Some have termed the Western drought, which began during the previous triple-dip La Niña in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a mega-drought, due to its persistence. In parts of the West, as many as three out of every four years in the 21st century have been classified as drought years. This is especially true in parts of California and the Southwest.”

With La Niña driving winter weather again this year, meteorologists predict drier conditions in the South with colder, stormier weather in the northern half of the country during the winter and early-spring months.

Over the winter

NOAA's U.S. Winter Outlook predicts wetter-than-average conditions for the Pacific Northwest, northern Rockies, Great Lakes and Ohio Valley. Typical for winter weather driven by La Niña, expect to see drier-than-average conditions in California, the Southwest, the southern Rockies, southern Plains, Gulf Coast and the Southeast. This means much of the widespread drought will continue over the winter in the West, Southwest, Great Basin and Great Plains, and will develop across the South-central and Southeastern U.S. However, drought conditions are expected to improve across the Northwestern part of the country, according to NOAA.

Winter temperature patterns mimic the precipitation predictions with warmer-than-average

temperatures favored in the Southwest, Great Basin, Southern Plains and Southeastern U.S., and below-normal-temperatures expected in the Pacific Northwest and western Great Lakes regions, as predicted by NOAA's U.S. Winter Outlook.

The U.S. National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center favors a transition to El Niño/Southern Oscillation neutral in February-April 2023 followed by a warmer-than-average summer for the entire country.

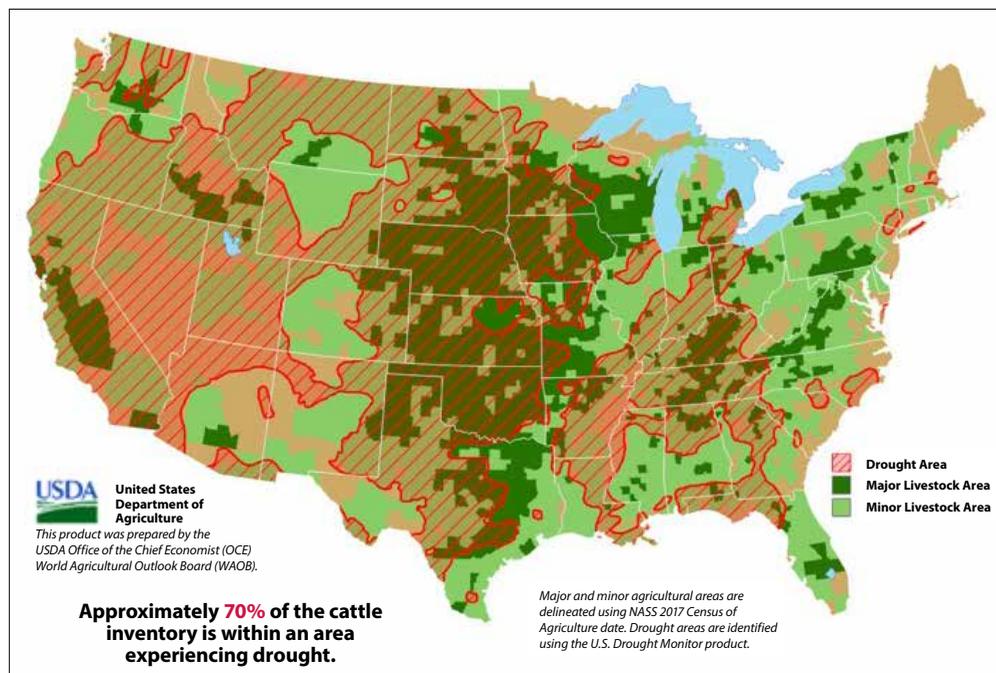
Coping with the climate

Cattlemen and women have already made hard decisions regarding their cow herds with the ongoing arid conditions many are facing. The market commentary, Set to Climb, on page 26 continues the discussion on what impact drought-driven culling has had on the current cattle markets and what to expect in the future. For producers who chose to winter their cattle even in light of limited forage and feedstuffs, the feature story, Supplementing Performance, on page 32 offers insights on different cow herd supplementation options. And finally, for producers scrambling to find forage, don't forget to check the free Hereford Marketplace for pasture and hay listings: Hereford.org/commercial/marketplace/pasture-hay-listings/.

Additionally, as Rippey notes there are USDA-supported programs for producers impacted by drought and other weather events.

“The last couple of decades have been demonstrably difficult for the nation's cattle producers, due to crazy weather extremes such as extreme heat, bitter cold, punishing drought and severe floods,” he says. “Since 2008, USDA has provided an automatic safety net for U.S. cattle producers in drought-affected areas through the Livestock Forage Disaster Program. Other USDA programs have also provided assistance due to drought and other natural disasters. USDA certainly recognizes the challenges of farming amid changing climate and weather extremes — and will continue to support the agricultural sector in any way we can.” **HW**

Cattle Areas in Drought (Nov. 29, 2022 U.S. Drought Monitor Data)



U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook (Nov. 17, 2022 – Feb. 28, 2023)

