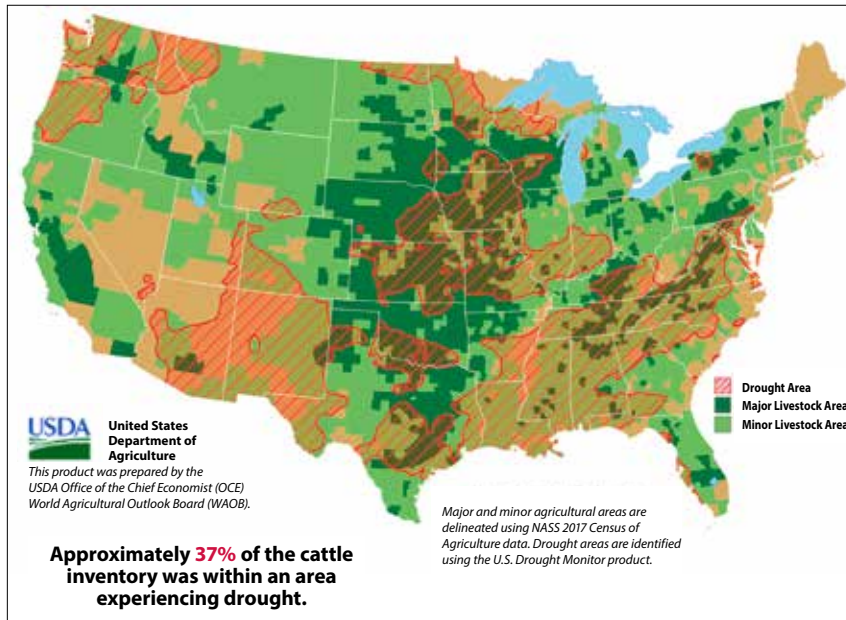


# Looking Ahead

Drought has improved in some areas, while other parts of the U.S. are still seeking moisture.

by *Sydnee Shive*

## Cattle Areas in Drought (Nov. 28, 2023 U.S. Drought Monitor data)



In 2023, several of the nation’s essential cattle production areas across the West and Great Plains saw a significant decrease in drought intensity, or complete eradication of drought.

Brad Rippey, USDA meteorologist explains drought covered more than 40% of the United States for 126 consecutive weeks (Sept. 29, 2020 – Feb. 21, 2023). The streak ended in early 2023.

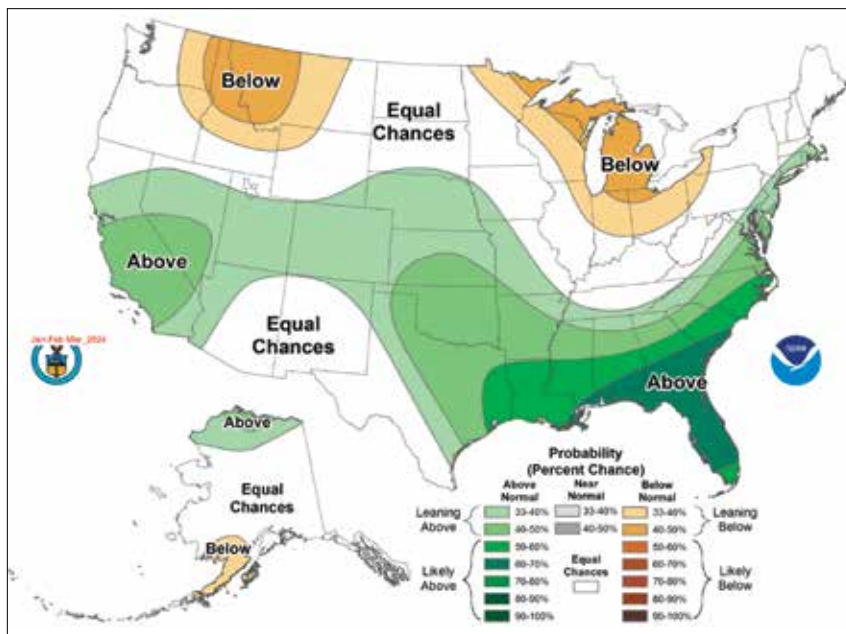
“A year ago, on Nov. 29, 2022, 70% of the U.S. cattle inventory was experiencing drought,” Rippey says. “Since spring 2023, that number has been below 50%, dipping as low as 34% in August.”

As of November 2023, 37% of the U.S. cattle inventory was experiencing drought, mostly spanning portions of the Great Plains and western Corn Belt, in addition to the Southeast.

Several drought-affected areas received significant precipitation in late November and early December with a correlated decrease in drought intensity. Renewed moisture is partly due to the El Niño weather pattern replacing La Niña after three years.

“El Niño has already been present, based on oceanic indicators, for many months. To this point, major impacts have been mostly outside the United States,” Rippey explains. “In recent weeks, however, we’ve started seeing signs of an enhanced subtropical jet stream across the southern U.S., one of the winter hallmarks of El Niño. This has led to several significant, drought-easing precipitation events from the southern Great Plains into the Southeast.”

## Seasonal Precipitation Outlook (January 2024 - March 2024) Issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Nov. 16, 2023



### **El Niño expectations**

“El Niño is the driver behind the National Weather Service’s cold-season outlooks for 2023-2024,” Rippey says. “There may be other factors at play, such as oceanic warmth, but ultimately, El Niño is expected to play an outsized role in determining winter 2023-2024 and spring 2024 weather patterns.”

No two El Niño events are the same. Forecasts for the 2023-2024 winter are based on prior El Niño events, meaning expectations are not always reality.

However, with an active Southern storm track that’s expected to last into spring 2024, Rippey and company predict periods of wet weather, especially in the Gulf Coast States and along the southern Atlantic Coast. He says significant storminess may affect the Southwest, and potentially California.

“Outside the southern U.S., winter/spring expectations from El Niño include warmer-than-normal

weather across the North and drier-than-normal conditions in northern sections of the Rockies and High Plains, as well as a broad area of the Midwest centered on the Great Lakes States.”

### **Continued improvement**

It’s no secret that the nation’s dwindling cow herd is due in part to severe drought.

“The drought was likely a significant factor in the reduction in the cattle inventory as lack of forage during the years of the drought resulted in a more rapid pace of placement of cattle in feedlots and relatively high numbers of beef cows sent to slaughter,” says Shayle Shagam, livestock, poultry and dairy analyst, USDA World Agricultural Outlook Board. “As a result, the cattle inventory on July 1, 2023, was 95.9 million head, 3% lower than 2022 and the lowest number since 2014. The beef cow inventory was 29.4 million head, down 3%

from 2022. In part reflecting the lower cow numbers, the 2023 calf crop was expected to be 2% lower than 2022.”

Even with the reduction of drought in some areas last year, there’s still a way to go before the U.S. cow herd numbers rebound.

“Looking forward into 2024, any diminution of the drought could be expected to result in improved forage and water supplies,” Shagam says. “These conditions would be favorable for producers to look toward herd expansion by both reducing the number of cows sent to slaughter and retaining heifers to breed. Although the reduction of cattle sent to slaughter in 2024 would reduce beef supplies in the short run, it would be expected to lead to increased numbers of cattle in the following years.” **BA**