

# Drought Ready

Planning and pasture management can minimize the impact.

Periods of favorable rainfall conditions make everyone a better manager. Periods of drought conditions distinguish the better managers from the rest.

Many philosophical statements come to mind when I consider pasture management during drought. One of my favorites of all time came from Mr. Wayne Hamilton, one of my range science professors at Texas A&M University during my college years: “The time to start planning for a drought is when it is raining.” He immediately followed that statement with: “And the time to start planning for a rain is during a drought.”

The bottom line is pasture management requires planning, and there is no substitute for planning ahead, which encompasses two aspects: a management plan for typical conditions and contingency plans, which should include a drought plan.

## Think ahead

The best means to prepare pastures for drought is effective long-term pasture management before the drought. The fact is that well-managed pastures are more resilient during stress and recover more rapidly afterward.

In application, this means pastures are managed for adequate long-term residual and litter cover; soil fertility for introduced and cropped pastures is maintained at proper levels for expected production; pastures routinely receive adequate growing-season rest and recovery; and stocking rate does not exceed carrying capacity. If these are accomplished effectively during favorable moisture conditions, then pastures will be in good condition when unfavorable conditions occur.

In today’s world, regional drought conditions are usually forecast and can be easily monitored as conditions change. For instance, the *U.S. Drought Monitor* is an excellent tool to track soil moisture conditions. In addition, states like Oklahoma provide producers with detailed and localized data, such as county-level monthly average rainfall via mesonets — networks of automated weather stations. Weather and climate tools such as these help inform producers about regional weather conditions, which help with planning. Informed producers should not be caught off guard as drought materializes.

## Prepare for the worst

Drought preparation should include an appropriate contingency plan that involves strategies and activities that can be executed in an orderly fashion as adverse conditions persist.

You should prepare inventories of cattle by class, stored forages and standing forages to be grazed, as well as assessments of livestock water quantity and quality. It is also important to determine the period of time the herd could be maintained as is if drought conditions continued, as well as the length of time the herd could be retained as the stocking rate is incrementally reduced.

You must answer these questions:

- What do I need to do to get to the next season of anticipated rainfall?
- What do I need to do to get to the next spring growing season?
- How can I accomplish this while limiting the long-term damage to the pastures caused by grazing livestock?

## Take action

Once drought settles on a region, you need to begin implementing your drought plans. Your first thoughts should include:

- Assessing available and estimated forage production for projected time periods.
- Developing a destocking plan and strategy to market existing livestock if forage demand exceeds projected forage supply.
- Determining the critical dates by which management decisions need to be made.

Typical destocking strategies include early weaning calves, marketing growing cattle and marketing open and problem cows (poor udders, eye and feet issues, poor disposition). Likewise, marketing less uniform and poorer-performing cows with the intent of maintaining the most productive and uniform cows as the core herd.

Relocating the core herd to other regions of the country unaffected by drought conditions is also an option. Rarely is feeding through an extended drought a wise economic decision, but it is also an option. However, early identification and purchase of required hay supplies in bulk is usually much more cost effective before drought is fully realized, rather than waiting until hay prices become inflated.

Next is assessing livestock water supplies. Pastures with unreliable or less dependable water supplies should be grazed early while water is not limited in quantity or quality.

You should maintain adequate residuals in all pastures, especially the native grass pastures, where recovery

is longer and more difficult to achieve than in introduced pastures. If pastures are to be grazed harder or shorter or used as a sacrifice area, target introduced pastures such as bermudagrass, which can recover quickly with fertility, weed management and moisture. Avoid overutilization of native pastures.

Manage the grazing by rotating the remaining cattle through pastures, closely monitoring the projected number of grazing days (weeks) ahead of the herd and the recovery rate of the pastures. If grazing expectations are not being met without overutilizing the pastures (grazing into the desired residual), destocking protocols should be further implemented. Avoid “throwing open” all the gates. Manage the grazing, recovery and residuals in the pastures throughout the duration.

If drought conditions manifest during the peak rainfall periods of spring and early fall, early and timely implementation of management practices are of greater importance to meet projected production goals. You should apply fertilizer, especially nitrogen fertilizer, early at an adequate but conservative rate. You should perform establishment practices early in the season, and

only on the number of acres that can be well-prepared ahead of planting. Apply herbicide only if the target weeds are actively growing and not drought-stressed, usually early in the season. Make weed control a priority over fertility on introduced pastures if one must be chosen over the other.

Another wise management practice during drought is plowing and maintaining fire guards/breaks along fence lines around the perimeter of your property and pastures (including hay storage traps and barns), especially along the southern borders that adjoin county roads. With prevailing southerly winds, the southern boundaries are the most likely to be threatened by wildfires. This is a means to protect forage supplies in pastures during times when they are of the most value to your operation. In addition, regular planned use of prescribed fire on native pastures helps reduce buildup of plant material for wildfires to consume, aiding in suppression.

#### **Consider a safety net**

Participating in the USDA Risk Management Agency’s Pasture, Rangeland, Forage (PRF) insurance program can provide some assistance during droughts. The PRF insurance

program is designed to provide coverage for your pastures, rangelands and grazed forage crops. It gives producers the ability to cover replacement feed costs when forage for grazing or harvest is lost due to insufficient precipitation, not just during extreme drought.

PRF annual enrollment is in the fall preceding the year of coverage. Local and regional independent insurance agencies offer PRF insurance. It is well worth considering if you are a producer with grazing livestock and hay. It won’t alleviate drought conditions, but it can make them easier to survive. However, keep in mind that the best drought insurance for pastures is good long-term pasture management before and during the drought. **HW**

**Editor’s Note:** This is part of a continuing series of articles about regenerative ranching from Noble Research Institute, long trusted by beef cattle producers for supporting the industry with research, education and consultation. Follow the series in future issues of *Baldy Advantage* and *Hereford World*, as well as in special *1881* podcasts at [Hereford.org](http://Hereford.org). Additional regenerative resources and past articles in the series are also at [Noble.org](http://Noble.org).

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