



Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Cochran County  
Phone: 806-266-5215

Morton, Texas  
Fax: 806-266-0032

Kendra Bilbrey, CEA-AG  
kendra.bilbrey@ag.tamu.edu

May 2018

**Preparing for drought on the ranch: Threatening drought is good reason cattle producers should develop strategy now**

With so much news and talk of a possible drought this summer, some beef producers are already thinking about plans that will help them mitigate a possible water emergency when the dry months of summer arrive, reminiscent perhaps of the drought years of 2011-2012. During the worst of those years, many livestock operators remember rescuing distressed livestock, wells running low or empty, and hay and other forages burned up in the sun. The cost of supplemental feed to outlast a drought is too burdensome, and as such many producers opted to pasture herds out-of-state, or even cull or sell off large parts of their herds. While no one is suggesting a drought this year will cause the same dire consequences as did the historic drought earlier this decade, being ready and knowing what to do at the right time can make a real difference, perhaps even prevent a producer from going under if an extended drought should develop. When it comes to discussing drought mitigation in a livestock operation, Texas AgriLife Extension offers several resources, the best of which may be an extension publication titled "Maintaining Herd Performance During Drought" authored by Dr. Ron Gil, professor and Extension specialist, Texas A&M University. Though published nearly six years ago, the document offers a user-friendly and in-depth look at ways producers should respond to a drought emergency, and perhaps more importantly, when to take the required steps to minimize drought damage. We offer a few observations from that document as well as —suggestions pulled from two other independent university studies about drought and herd health during times of drought.

Lesson #One

"Develop a plan before conditions are out of hand and forces you to do something that is extremely costly," excerpt from an Iowa State University study. When it comes to raising livestock during dry times, it goes without saying that drought tends to stress the entire herd, perhaps not as much as it does a producer who must suffer through the mental and economic anguish drought can cause. The sun and heat are punishing to man, animal and environment, and in periods of drought, when the rains fail to fall, things can begin to go south very quickly. According to a University of South Dakota study, getting a late start in drought management is the first and usual mistake an unprepared producer will make. Putting a lot of thought and effort into a plan before a drought arrives will help producers be prepared. By building a quality drought plan, producers will know what to do and when it needs to be done. Such familiarity with the plan will build confidence in taking the actions that need to be taken when they are most needed. It also offers the best hope of maintaining herd health during a drought crisis. "The hardest thing to do is maintain herd performance when forage is limited in quality and quantity.

Compounding that problem is the cost of supplemental feed and hay. Feeding through drought usually is not an economically viable option. For hay feeding to make economic sense cattle prices would have to be high. In most situations, the most economical option is to reduce herd size so supplemental forage will not have to be purchased or fed," according to Gil's report. He suggested that forage may still be available for grazing if destocking is carried out early enough, so recognizing when to downsize the herd is an important step in eventually rebuilding it following the drought event. "With early destocking, normal herd management practices will be sufficient. All forage will come from growing or standing forage. When the only option seems to be buying hay, then sell cows," the article advises.

#### Environmental/Stress Management

Managing through a drought requires implementing practices that help reduce stress. Gil says this includes nutritional and environmental factors which lead to increased energy requirements of cows and calves. Fencing off watering areas that become boggy will reduce energy required to maintain production, but this only works when there are other sources of water available. Hauling water is an expense that cannot be supported. If water is simply no longer available without shipping it in, it is time to liquidate. Otherwise, manage cows to maintain a body condition score (BCS) of four or above on mature cows and five on two and three-year-old cows. Accomplish this by culling early and allowing cows to maintain condition on standing forage. Thin cows are more susceptible to pathogens and parasites. To take advantage of natural immunity and ability to withstand pathogens and parasites, cows must be in good physical condition.

#### Health Management

Continue to protect cows and calves against clostridial diseases such as blackleg. As cattle graze on shorter and shorter forage the chance of picking up soil borne pathogens increase. Blackleg, leptospirosis and anthrax are just a few of the diseases that occur with greater frequency during drought. Protect against the reproductive diseases, campylobacter fetus (vibrio), brucellosis, haemophilus somnus, trichomoniasis, IBR and BVD to name a few. Nutritional stress will affect reproductive performance. Failure to prevent diseases will only compound the problem. Parasites, both internal and external, need to be monitored and controlled as needed as well. When grass is short, due to drought, internal parasites may not be a problem.

#### Nutritional Management Strategies

The key to successful forage management during drought is to cull and destock early enough and go deep enough to provide adequate forage for the remaining cow herd. To economically maintain cows, they must be able to maintain body condition on standing forage without supplemental energy. When destocking is initiated early fewer cows will have to be culled over the course of a drought. Culling strategies need to be in place well in advance of any drought. Initiate destocking at the slightest hint of dry weather during the growing season. Keep cows that are least susceptible to nutritional stress caused by poor forage conditions. This will be the mid-aged cows between four and 10 years of age. At lower body condition scores (BCS 3 and 4) cows of this age will average 35 and 20 percent higher conception rates than first and second calf cows. Always manage the forage base to allow adequate consumption and efficient use of marginal precipitation. Cows need to consume forage at the rate of 2 to 3 percent of their body weight to have a chance of maintaining acceptable production and reproductive performance. When grass is not growing the only way to ensure adequate forage is to reduce demand through destocking. This will be a constant battle until the drought breaks, requiring constant monitoring and periodic adjusting to prevent decline in range condition and cow performance.

### Marketing

One common complaint heard at the coffee shop and sale barn concerns the rancher's inability to significantly influence market price for weaned calves. Although absolute value per pound is determined by demand, a producer has complete control over relative value of calves. Every calf produced should sell in the upper 50 percent of that day's market. It is not feasible to always top the market. Cattle that top a market on any given sale day can change with one order being placed. The high price and certainly year to year. Calves and yearlings that sell in the top half of a market have not changed that much for the past 20 years.

### Stress-free operation

Most ranches do not intentionally waste money on production expenses. The same cannot be said about personal expenses. When times are tight, communication between family members and ranch employees needs to open. Unfortunately, communication normally breaks down and closes up during such challenging times. Ranchers do not want the family or employees to know and/or worry about the financial stability of the ranch. Most underestimate both the family and employees resolve to survive during tough times. Everyone should know what the situation is and input on ways to cut cost should be sincerely requested.

Written By: Logan Hawkes for Southwest Farm Press