

Dealing with Drought

A Quick Guide for Beef Cattle Producers

Drought Facts

- Droughts are normal climate features
- They can happen anywhere and at almost any time
- Drought creates management challenges for both cow-calf and stocker operations
- Widespread drought can affect markets

Develop a Strategy

- Focus on operational long-run sustainability and survival
- Evaluate pastures as well as hay supply and quality
- Determine herd's nutrient needs
- Estimate supplemental feed requirements
- Evaluate water supplies
- Determine if additional water sources will be needed
- Consider early weaning of calves
- Determine which cattle to cull
- Cull early enough to conserve grass and hay supplies
- Consider custom grazing and retained ownership options

Determine Which Animals to Cull

- Cull all open cattle
- Cull any that are structurally unsound
- Cull based on age
- Cull based on performance



Wean Now

- Put calves on a high-energy, high-protein diet specifically designed for early weaning
- Hand-feed starter diet for 10 to 14 days until feeding up to 4 to 5 pounds per head per day
- Gradually increase to self-feeder as total intake increases
- Manage scours and other diseases
- Use a single diet for best performance through normal weaning age

Advantages of Early Weaning

- Promotes more efficient feed utilization
- Allows more cows to be carried on a limited feed supply
- Results in cheaper gains from excellent feed conversion of early weaned calves
- Reduces herd energy requirements
- Helps cows to cycle earlier and improves rebreeding rates

Disadvantages of Early Weaning

- Calf management and nutrition must be excellent
- Labor, facilities, and feed must be available for feeding small calves
- Seedstock cattle must wean within defined age windows for breeds to accept data

Creep Feeding Considerations

- Will improve calf weaning weights
- Is a good option when calf nutritional needs are not being met (poor forage quality)
- Will not greatly reduce pressure on pastures or lactating dams
- Early weaning may be a better alternative when forage supply is limiting
- May or may not be economically feasible depending on feed prices and animal sale prices

Develop Efficient Herd Nutritional Programs

- Divide cattle into feeding groups based on nutrient needs
- Allocate forage/feed supplies to each group to closely match animal requirements
- Plan nutrition programs considering that feed intake levels may be reduced during hot weather
- Plan use of existing grass and hay to match feeding groups' needs
- Consider the use of alternative feeds

Bulls

- Younger bulls need less quantity but higher quality diets
- Bulls should begin breeding season in a body condition score 6
- Breeding season activity can reduce body condition
- Target 75 percent of expected mature weight for two-year-old bulls

Females in thin body condition

- Rebreed slower
- Produce less colostrum
- May not have sufficient nutrient reserves for maximum milk production
- Are less likely to wean a live calf

Effectively Use Alternative Feeds for Beef Cattle

- Consider commodity feed price trends and availability
- Compare nutritional values of feedstuffs and economic replacement values
- Understand alternative feed storage, shipping, and handling challenges
- Consult a nutritionist on diet formulations and feeding limitations
- Use ionophores and growth promoting implants as appropriate

Manage Your Forages

- Use rotational, limit, and strip grazing practices to stretch forage
- Minimize hay storage and feeding losses
- Forage test to accurately match hay supplies to supplementation programs
- Consider designating a sacrifice area for feeding alternative materials to avoid long-term, abusive overgrazing in some fields
- Consider stockpiling bermudagrass and tall fescue to delay hay feeding
- Use annual ryegrass in combination with small grains
- Do not overlook alternative forage crops such as brassicas

Ensure Herd Health

- Hot, dry weather can increase the incidence and severity of common diseases
- Control both internal and external parasites
- Nutritional stress negatively affects immune function
- BQA guidelines are even more important for cattle stressed by drought
- Work with your veterinarian to ensure health

Manage the Heat

- Ensure that water sources are clean and easily accessible
- Provide shade
- Work cattle early in the morning

Nitrate Poisoning Concerns

- Nitrogen fertilization during drought increases risk
- Have forage samples tested for excess nitrate levels

- Corn, bermudagrass, sorghum-sudangrass, and pearl millet are susceptible
- Haying or ensiling does not eliminate nitrate problems
- Watch for signs of nitrate poisoning in cattle and treat immediately

Other Cattle Poisoning Concerns

- Scout pastures and hayfields for poisonous plants
- Cattle are more likely to consume poisonous plants when forage is limited
- Quickly recognize and treat signs of poisoning in livestock

Common Poisonous Plants

- Perilla mint (purple mint)
- Nightshades
- Lantana
- Pokeweed
- Buckeye (horse chestnut)
- Oak buds and acorns
- Bracken fern
- Mountain laurel
- Pigweed
- Wild cherry (black cherry)



Adapted from “Mississippi Beef Cattle Producer Quick Reference for Dealing with Drought” and used with permission from Mississippi State University Extension Service

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

© 2007 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved

www.aces.edu