

Drought continues to affect cattlemen

CARL HOVELAND

The main topic of conversation in coffee shops throughout most of Georgia this summer has been the drought and what it has done. It has been devastating.

Recently, University of Georgia agricultural economists John McKissick, Brigid Doherty, Jeff Teasley and Bill Givan attempted to calculate the expected losses in the Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development special report number 11.

The largest state farm commodity dollar loss has been from cotton, at \$233 million. The second largest has been pasture loss, at \$177 million. And the third largest loss has been hay, at \$89 million.

Cattle producers have also been particularly hard hit this year. It has resulted in lower weight gains, liquidation of herds, and purchasing hay and other feed supplements. Commercial hay producers have had little hay to sell, and pastures and hay lands are generally not covered by crop insurance.

The effect of the drought on beef cattle producers has been enormous. In addition, it has affected several businesses and rural communities. Sales of tractors, mowers, hay balers, seed, fertilizer and fencing have declined. Also, cattle producers that have suffered drought losses are not likely to be purchasing many new vehicles or investing in house renovation.

More seriously, farm debt has increased a lot, which will create difficulties in the future. The cruel contrast is that large urban areas are experiencing an economic boom with an expanding economy.

Most cattle producers have hope things will get better. It will eventually rain, and grass will grow again. The problem is that many producers will be going into autumn and winter with little or no hay. If rain fall increases in autumn, there is a potential to grow some forage for winter. However, that depends on having a vigorous stand of fertilized grass that can take advantage of the rainfall.

Several things can be done:

1. Soil test and apply fertilizer.
2. Crop land in the Coastal Plain can be planted with browntop millet or pearl millet for good autumn grazing before frost. Sorghum-sudangrass is not recommended because it can contain dangerous levels of prussic acid at frost that will kill cattle.
3. Plant 90-120 pounds per acre of rye or wheat on prepared land for early grazing. Since this is expensive as the sole forage for beef cattle, limit grazing to a few hours per day on this annual pasture while maintaining them on cheaper low-quality hay or pasture if available.
4. No-till planted rye or wheat on bermudagrass or bahiagrass sods will supply grazing by early February.
5. Annual ryegrass can be broadcast at 25 pounds per acre on grass sods or on prepared land. Light tillage can improve stands on tight bahiagrass or bermudagrass sods. If good autumn rainfall comes, annual ryegrass can provide considerable winter pasture if well fertilized. Annual ryegrass seed is cheap this year. This grass responds well to application of 50 to 60 pounds of nitrogen per acre in autumn and again in winter and spring, resulting in abundant supplies of high-quality grazing and hay in late winter and spring.
6. Tall fescue pastures have suffered severely from drought in many areas, and stands may be hurt. It may be necessary to thicken stands with no-till seeding 25 pounds per acre of tall fescue, but this will not allow any grazing until late

spring. If stands are gone, it might be desirable to no-till plant rye or wheat to provide needed winter grazing and then replant the tall fescue next year. If tall fescue stands are good, be sure they are well fertilized this autumn and winter.

Most producers have culled their herds and sold undesirable cattle to avoid buying hay for them. All of this reduced forage needs in summer. Smaller herds will help reduce forage needs during the coming winter as well. With limited hay supplies, poultry litter and other low-cost feeds may offer savings for cattle maintenance this winter for a better year ahead.


The last several years of drought will continue to cause problems for some time. Stands and vigor of some grasses will be affected. Some shade trees will die as subsoils will remain dry unless adequate rains arrive to replenish ground water supplies needed for deep roots. Many wells, springs and small streams have dried up or have a very low water flow. A wet winter is needed to recharge these water supplies. We hope the heavens open and provide abundant amounts of life-giving water.

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