

8 SIMPLE RULES FOR SURVIVING DROUGHT AND A FORAGE DEFICIT

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The historic drought of 2007 has put Georgia's cattle producers in survival mode. Having been involved in the cattle industry in various ways (cow-calf producer, County Agent, and now Forage Extension Specialist), I know how stressful these times can be. I also know that all droughts eventually end and there are several things that must be done to both survive and prepare to rebuild. I recently have been presenting my "8 Simple Rules" at various county, regional, and state-wide meetings and have had several who requested I detail these "Rules" in this month's article.

Rule #1: Stay well-rooted. We often forget that there is more to a plant than what we see. Roots often are at least as massive and, in some cases, are more massive than the top growth that we graze or bale. However, because of continuous grazing and poor soil fertility (usually low soil pH), the roots of most pasture plants in Georgia are currently very shallow. In fact, the most common question that I was asked in 2007 was "Why are my hayfields green and my pastures brown?" The answer is that we at least allowed our hayfields the chance to recover from being cut. Our pastures were so overgrazed that the roots never had a chance to go looking for water deep in the soil profile. So, prevent overgrazing by rotating your cattle between smaller pastures rather than opening all the gates on the place and letting them have at it and keep the soil pH at 6.0 or more to encourage root development.

Rule #2: Test your forages. Testing your hay's quality is absolutely critical. First, a tremendous amount (around 10-20%) of the hay that was made this year is very high in nitrates. Don't make this drought even worse by loosing calves or even cows! Forage testing is also important in developing the most inexpensive ration possible to carry cows through the winter. Hay and supplement prices are at record highs. It may be that selling your hay and the bulk of your herd makes the most economic sense.

Rule #3: Keep a sharp pencil and a calculator. It bears repeating: "Hay and supplement prices are at record highs." Make sure you compare the cost of the various feed supplements. Add up what you will have invested in each cow and make sure she can pay you back. Be sure you're not throwing good money after bad. It may be that the best investment you can make is not in your cows, but in your pastures. Remember, cattle come and go, but you're pasture stays put.

Rule #4: Know what it will take. If you are carrying cows through the winter, you need to make sure you're going to have enough to feed them and that you can afford to feed them (see rule #3). Ruminants must have a certain amount of food (dry matter) everyday. For cows, it's about 2% of their body weight. So, a 1200 lb cow must eat 24 lbs of dry matter every day ($1200 \times 2\% = 24$). But don't forget to account for storage and feeding losses. For example, if you're storing hay outside on the ground with no cover, you can pretty much assume you will lose 40-50% to weathering and feeding loss. So, in this case, you may need 48 lbs per head per day. That equates to nearly 1 ½ bales (1000 lb round rolls) of good quality hay per cow per month. Hopefully you have some winter annuals to graze, too. Though they are the cheapest food source currently available, be careful not to overestimate how much forage they will provide.

Rule #5: Cut your losses. As you can see in calculating your forage needs (Rule #4), storage and feeding losses are a big deal now that hay and feed prices are so high. Do whatever can be done to protect hay and feed from weathering losses and prevent feeding losses. Store as many bales as possible under cover (barn, hoop structure, old chicken houses, tarps, etc.). If they have to be outside, orient the bales in North-South rows to maximize the sun's drying action and elevate them in some way (old tires, poles, a gravel pad, etc.). Absolutely do not store bales under trees. Don't unroll hay directly on the ground if it takes them more than a few hours to clean it up. A properly used hay ring limits feeding losses of hay to 5-6%.

Rule #6: Be efficient. One of our best assets this winter/spring will be our ability to graze small grains and ryegrass. However, if the cows are turned out as soon as the grass is ankle deep and they stay there until spring, only about 30% of what could be produced will ever make into the animal. (What other industry would accept the loss of 70% of their crop?) By strip-grazing (allowing access to only 2-3 days worth of forage at a time), you can more than double that efficiency! Manage your animals' grazing. Ration it out.

Rule #7: Invest in your pastures. After two successive years of drought, our pastures are in desperate need of attention. Weeds have popped up where pasture species have been abused. Tall fescue pastures that used to have a little common bermudagrass and dallisgrass now have A LOT of common bermudagrass and dallisgrass. Even bahiagrass has allowed a foot-hold to dogfennel, wild turnip (radish), and a host of other weeds. Weed control is a great place to start, but remember that it will likely also take properly-timed fertilizer applications, better grazing management, and even re-establishment to reclaim these pastures.

Rule #8: Watch the forecast. Catching the "7-day Outlook" from your favorite TV or radio meteorologist has become a favorite pastime, but it is the long-range outlook (one or more months in advance) that gives us something plan around. Winter and spring weather trends give reasonable estimations of what the future holds. Climatologists from all over the Southeast contribute to the Southeast Climate Consortium (www.agclimate.org) to routinely update weather outlooks. Extension agronomists and animal scientists collaborate with the climatologists to make management recommendations based on these long-range outlooks. These recommendations can help you plan how best to invest in your cattle operation.

To learn more about steps you can take to pull through the 2007 drought and to best position your operation for when the drought ends, visit our website at www.georgiaforages.com or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office.