

KEYS TO LIMITING THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF DROUGHT

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Here we go again! I know you are all hoping for an end to these cycles of severe drought. But, it isn't a matter of "if" but "when" drought hits us in the Southeast. 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. The most important thing to do is to ensure that the decisions made during the drought minimize the cost after the drought. As I travel giving updates at Cattlemen's meetings around the state, I have been hitting the following keys to limiting the long-term effects of drought.

Confine Your Damage

The instinctual reaction to dry weather is to allow the cattle to graze over more acres. This is a short-term tactic that will help weather a dry spell, but it is not something one should do through a severe drought. There's no reason to overgraze the whole farm. Limit the damage and place the cattle in a sacrifice area. The best sacrifice areas are the fields or paddocks that one may already have plans to renovate. In fact, overgrazing in those areas may help during the re-establishment phase. Since it is dry, extra hoof traffic is not unlikely to cause severe compaction deep in the soil profile, so don't be afraid to keep animal numbers high on those smaller areas. Just ensure that the area is not in a spot where the animal waste will runoff into the creeks once that drought-ending rain finally arrives.

Wean Early

Cows with suckling calves require relatively high quality forage and lots of it. Cows have their lowest nutritional needs in early to mid-gestation. Calves that are 5 months old or older can be weaned off the cows relatively quickly and easily. Thus, early weaning can maintain brood animals on poor quality forage with little or no supplemental feed while allowing the producer to stretch available feed. If the drought persists and gets worse, wean all calves that are 60 days of age or older. In some years, feed prices allow calves to be retained and fed a low-forage and high grain/by-product-based diet (80 percent grain/by-product) to continue growing at acceptable rates. Use a sharp pencil on this one, though. High grain and by-product prices this year may not make this feasible.

Cull Following a Priority List

You should view forage and supplements as investments, especially during a drought. Producers should invest only in animals that are likely to generate a return and should focus on those animals that will provide the highest returns. 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. Carrying open, old, or unproductive animals through a drought is unlikely to be feasible. Even in a normal year, we generally recommend that you pregnancy test and sell cows that are open, old (≥ 10 years old), did not wean a calf, have a physical defect, or are of bad disposition. As the

drought enters an advanced stage, start culling cows that had calves sub-standard weaning weights. Try to maintain a herd of cows that will calve within a 90-day period. As the drought worsens into severe or extreme conditions, cull more deeply based on calf weaning weights, cow age, and calving date.

As the drought worsens, prices for culled animals will drop quickly. Pay close attention to the long-range weather forecasts and the current market. Do not hesitate to lower the population early rather than too late. If no drought relief is in sight, sell before the market price declines sharply. Remember, cattle come and go, but you're pasture stays put. It may be that the best investment you can make is not in your cows, but in your pastures.

Don't Depend on Hay that You Don't Have

Running through all of your hay stocks this early in the year is akin to counting chickens before they've hatched. This is not a year that one should count on buying hay to meet their needs. There may not be much to be had and what is available is likely to be extraordinarily expensive. Hay stocks in Georgia are still at historically low levels. Further, USDA-NASS statistics have indicated that hay acres in Georgia have decreased by about 12%. Though residues from other crops often contribute much to hay stocks in a drought year, that forage mostly won't be available until late in the year and the amount, quality, and value of that forage is still to be determined.

Use a Hay Stretcher

Given these concerns about hay availability, one should take care to stretch out the hay supplies that they do have. The first step, which was purposefully mentioned first, is to feed hay only to those cows that can turn a profit. But, there are a number of by-product feeds that are available that are low in starch, which will help keep fiber digestion high while providing supplemental energy. This will stretch one's hay supplies, but remember to do so only after counting the costs.

One should also use a feeding strategy that minimizes hay losses. Using a hay ring or cone feeder will keep feeding losses below 10% (some < 5%). Don't unroll hay directly on the ground if it takes them more than a 5-6 hours to clean it up, as losses in this situation may exceed 30% if it remains on the ground for several days.

Know What it Will Take

As we've already established, one should always figure what it will take to feed them enough and that it is cost-effective. Here's how to calculate it. 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.

Know What You are Feeding

Testing your hay's quality is absolutely critical. Much of the hay that was produced last

year (which we are feeding now) was exceptionally low in digestibility and energy. This will require more energy supplementation to retain body condition in one's cattle. Furthermore, one should be acutely aware of the risk high nitrates in forage produced this year. Don't make this drought even worse by loosing cows or calves to nitrate toxicosis!

Watch the Long-Range Outlook

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 to plan around. Though predictions of summer trends are highly variable because of thunderstorms and tropical depressions (etc.), fall and winter trends are more predictable and long-range forecasts 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 drought management strategies and how to best position your operation for when the drought ends, check out the "Drought Info" quicklink on our website at www.georgiaforages.com or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office.

got questions?

Have a question or topic that you want Dr. Hancock to address? Email him at: questions@georgiaforages.com.