

RESETTING YOUR STOCKING RATE

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Over the course of the last few years, we have drastically reduced the number of beef cattle in Georgia because of extreme drought, high input prices, and most recently a shaky economy. In fact, Georgia's Jan. 1 inventory of about 536,000 head of beef cows is the lowest its been since 1961 (according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service estimates). Call me an optimist, but I think Georgia's beef cattle industry is poised for a rebound when the dust finally settles on this economy. (In case you missed it, there were a series of excellent articles in last month's Georgia Cattleman about the outlook for the beef cattle industry.)

As Georgia cattlemen begin to think about rebuilding, I would argue that this is a good time for us to reassess whether or not our traditional stocking rates are appropriate. It is especially important to consider this in the context of recent trends in weather variability and cattle genetics. In upcoming articles, I will address how input prices influence stocking rate decisions, too.

Trends in Weather Variability

Listen to just about anyone who has been in the cattle business in Georgia for any length of time and they'll tell you, "the weather ain't what it used to be." A look at recent weather data does seem to back up the belief that the extremes have been more extreme of late. Consider the data in Figure 1. It seems that during the past 10 years it has been more common for monthly rainfall totals to fall well-short of "normal" or average rainfall amounts, especially in the spring. Though only data from Athens are presented here, these trends are similar in other areas of the state.

Keep in mind that when drought reduces pasture productivity, it automatically increases the effective stocking rate on that pasture. For example, if the pasture produces just 40% less than it normally does and the same number of cattle are kept on the pasture, then the stocking rate is effectively increased by 67%!

Of course, we all know that it is not a matter of "if" we'll have a drought, but a matter of "when" and "how bad." These weather data indicate that we need to adjust our target stocking rate in anticipation of commonly having less rainfall than the long-term average would suggest. As a rule of thumb, anticipate that your farm will only receive 60-80% of "normal" rainfall at any one time. Further, do everything you can to increase the ability of rainwater to infiltrate and be held in your soils (i.e., increase soil organic matter, maintain proper soil pH, and maintain at least 2-3 inches of grass sod on your pastures and hayfields).

Before leaving this subject, it is important to recognize that rotational grazing can help temper the pasture against the decreases in productivity associated with a drought. If rotationally grazed, the available pasture can be rationed out more efficiently. This allows the producer to weather sudden decreases in forage growth without having to feed as much hay or sell animals to lower the stocking rate.

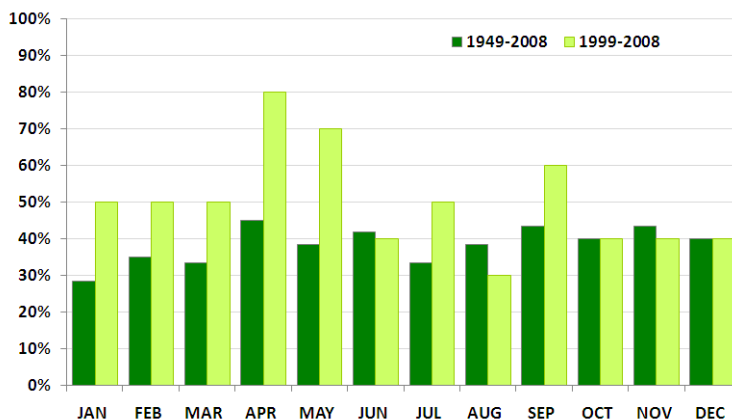


Figure 1. The incidence of monthly rainfall totals in Athens, GA that are less than 75% of the long-term (60-year) average for each given month during 1949-2008 and the most recent 10 years. (Source: the Southeast Regional Climate Center – www.sercc.com/).

Even with the Same Head Per Acre, Stocking Rate Has Increased

One of the biggest surprises to folks is that our stocking rates have effectively drifted higher over the last few decades. Sure, most of our cattlemen run about the same number of head on a per acre basis that they did thirty years ago. But, today's cattle are not like the cattle of that era. In 1975, the average beef cow weighed about 1050 lbs. More recently, the average weight of beef cows in the U.S. is estimated to be well over 1350 lbs. Bigger cows eat more and this increase in average body weight means that stocking rate has effectively increased by about 30%!

There can be little doubt that trends in cattle genetics have also resulted in tremendous gains in brood cow performance, as measured by the productivity of their calves. The consequence of this is that many of our modern beef cows require more nutrients to sustain higher levels of productivity (i.e., higher milk production and calf gains) and to maintain condition (BCS).

Is Your Stocking Rate On Target?

The past few years have given us an opportunity to look at how close traditional stocking rates fit individual farms. Chances are, if you were the last cattlemen in your area to start feeding hay during the most recent droughts, you are pretty close to being on target. On the other hand, if you had to start feeding after only a few weeks of dry weather, you probably need to look at lowering your stocking rate and doing things different.

Unfortunately, there is no way that I or anyone else can give a blanket recommendation about what the stocking rate should be as a rule of thumb. Each farm is different. Ultimately, it boils down to the productivity of the pasture and the efficiency of the grazing management.

Need Help Determining Your Optimum Stocking Rate?

Learning how to get the most out of your pasture and how you can develop a more efficient grazing system is a necessary prerequisite for determining your optimum stocking rate. One of the best ways to do this is to attend a Grazing School. The 2009 Georgia Grazing School is scheduled for September 22-23 and will be held in Athens at the Livestock Instructional Arena. This training is specifically geared toward producers who are interesting in improving the efficiency of their pasture and grazing systems. Participation is capped at 35 participants to ensure that everyone is given individualized service. The training is centered around a classroom environment, but this is complemented by several hands-on demonstrations and farm visits. More information on the Georgia Grazing School is available on the Georgia Forages website (www.georgiaforages.com).

Of course, your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Agent can also provide you with additional information about optimizing your stocking rate, as well as helping you to register for the Grazing School. If you have questions about these issues, contact your local Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.