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Can We Feed Through Winter?

The recent line of rain showers that passed through the area makes a person feel like it can still rain, but it was a long way from breaking the extremely dry conditions we've been experiencing the past several months. Not to take a negative focus, but if you've been following the US drought monitor <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/> you know that most of the United States west of the Mississippi River is in various stages of drought. This large of area begins to create a drain on forage resources and creates concern on how livestock in the great plains will be fed.

Like it or not, worries about drought and how producers are going to make it through the winter with limited or no stored forage in some cases, is beginning to be at the center of mind for livestock producers. There are some critical steps that need to be made in order for those feeding livestock to successfully navigate the high-demand, winter-feeding period.

The first priority is to reduce the stocking rate to a level that can be sustained through the rest of fall, given the grazing resources available. That looks slightly different in each enterprise, but at its purest essence, this means strategically removing some of the mouths to be feed.

- If you are an operation that keeps or purchases stocker/feeders to utilize extra summer grass, fall grazing or other feed resources, this may be the time to sell early or send them to a grow yard or feedlot. Using stocker/feeder animals as part of the “normal” stocking rate of the operation allows producers to be flexible for drought and other adverse weather events. Many operations plan to utilize 30 to 50% of their summer forage for stockers in normal years, when forage production is limited these animals can be marketed reducing the culling of the herd that may need to occur.
- Selling replacements should also be considered, as these females will not provide a marketable calf for well over a year. In this current circumstance, these cattle may be too large of a drain on feed resources and have a respectable market value at the current time. Many operations pride themselves in genetics and building high quality replacements, so this can be a hard pill to swallow. That said, it still makes sense to cull hard and keep only the top cut, if you can't bring yourself to selling replacement females.
- Cull cowherd to a number that you can afford to winter by getting rid of old, open, less productive cows and/or cows that have higher nutrient requirements. Fall calving cows will require more nutrients to keep proper condition, and a higher level of nutrition equates to higher cost of winter feeding. If you have both spring and fall calving herds, this may be a year to sell fall pairs and let someone else feed them this winter. After culling to a sustainable level in the dry years, the number of cows left may more accurately reflect the sustainable long-term carrying capacity for your operation.
- Make the most of existing feed resources. If your management style is to graze entire pastures or crop fields, you might consider strip or paddock grazing to increase utilization rate. This approach does come with higher labor and fencing demand, but you might just find that it is a profitable endeavor. Reducing stored forage waste in storage, transport and feeding needs special attention this year as well.

These steps may not be palatable to everyone, because of changing traditional management styles, it may require more labor than typical or desired, or it may cost more than budgeted or what has been historically acceptable. At the end of the day, the goal should be to have an intact livestock operation to move forward, when weather conditions change as they always do. More information on dealing with issues surrounding drought can be found at:

<https://www.asi.k-state.edu/extension/beef/focusareas/feedandwater.html#drought>