

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Alternatives For Coping With Short Pasture

Recent rains have refreshed some cool season pastures and given growth to native range, but there is still a lot of summer ahead of us. My observation and reports from others as well, is that declining water levels in farm ponds might actually be more of a deterrent to a full grazing season than will be lack of forage. That is partly why I've recently written about water for livestock, but will focus on some management techniques to address declining forage today.

*Rotational grazing allows more efficient use of pasture forages. If the paddock number is three or more, and moisture isn't limiting, 1/3 to 1/4 of the land area can be made as hay for winter or emergency-use situations. Rotational grazing permits an earlier start in the season and extends grazing in the fall.

*Graze hay fields. If dry weather limits re-growth on hay fields, consider using them as pasture if the fields are, or can be, easily fenced, and water provided. Use bloat-prevention if the forages (alfalfa, red clover, white clover, etc.) can cause bloat.

*Creep feed nursing calves. When forage growth is limited, it's likely that neither energy nor protein needs are being met for optimal calf growth by pasture and milk. Consider creep feeding nursing calves to prevent losses in calf gains and in weaning weight, while reducing the stress on the cow and pasture.

*Early wean calves. In severe feed shortage, consider early weaning, especially for cows in a weight and body condition loss situation. Early weaning lowers cows' nutrient needs by up to 50%, allowing her to maintain or gain body weight and condition on less, as well as lower-quality, feed. Early-weaned calves will require a high-quality grain mix and forage to maintain adequate growth. Limit consumption to 1.5% of calf weight and free-choice quality grass hay.

*Provide supplemental forage. Dry matter intake declines when forage height becomes less than 3 in. The result is reduced weight gain, lowered milk production and loss of body condition. Providing hay or silage, if available, is likely the first course of action. Where possible, limit the grazable area while feeding supplemental forage to allow areas to rebound.

*Separate young cows and those with lower body condition. These cows need higher quality pasture or other forage and additional concentrate feed to regain condition. This would allow lower nutrient demand cows to remain on lower quality forage and/or supplementation to higher nutrient demand animals.

*Likely to be done only after early weaning has occurred, drylotting the cow herd allows pastures to rest and re-grow. If calves have been weaned, feed for dry cows can be limited only to what's needed for maintenance. It's possible, with some adaptation, to limit feed as little forage as 1/2 to 1% of the cow's body weight, with a grain supplement providing the rest of the cow's nutrient requirements. Don't attempt all-concentrate feeding for brood cows.

*If cattle are fed hay in a drylot, let the pasture re-grow to a height of 8-10 in. before grazing is allowed. If re-growth is quick to happen because of a return to abundant moisture, consider fencing off about 25% of the pasture and stockpile the growth for fall or winter grazing.

*If culling is necessary, reduce cattle numbers in this order: open cows, yearling steers and/or non-replacement heifers, lower-quality or older cows. Heavy culling into quality animals in the main breeding herd should only be done in critical circumstances.

For more ideas on addressing drought, go to www.KSUBEEF.org to check out videos from recent drought related webinars or visit your local K-State Research and Extension office.