

QUICK GUIDE

Planning for and Coping with Drought

Drought Facts

- Drought can be expected as part of normal production cycles
- Overall management plan should include drought preparation and coping plans
- Drought creates management challenges for both cow-calf and stocker operations
- Widespread drought can impact markets
- Focus on operational long-run sustainability and survival

Inventory Farm Resources

- Evaluate pasture, hay quality and supply
- Evaluate water supply
- Determine cattle nutrient needs
- Estimate supplemental feed requirements

Efficient Herd Nutritional Programs

- Divide cattle into feeding groups based on nutrient needs
- Allocate forage/ feed supplies to each group to closely match animal requirements

Bull Nutrition Basics

- Younger bulls need less quantity but higher quality diets
- Bulls should begin breeding season in a body condition score 6
- Breeding season activity can reduce body condition
- Target 75% of expected mature weight for two-year old bulls

Cows and heifers in thin body condition at calving time

- Rebreed slower
- Produce less colostrum
- May not have sufficient nutrient reserves for maximum milk production
- Are less likely to wean a live calf

Alternative Feeds for Beef Cattle

- Consider commodity feed price trends and availability
- Compare nutritional values of feedstuffs and economic replacement values
- Understand feed storage and handling challenges
- Consult with a nutritionist on diet formulations and feeding limitations
- Consider ionophores and growth promoting implants as appropriate

Forage-Related Options

- Consider stockpiling bermudagrass and tall fescue to delay hay feeding
- Use annual ryegrass in combination with small grains
- Forage test to accurately match hay supplies to supplementation programs
- Use rotational, limit, and strip grazing practice to stretch forage
- Minimize hay storage and feeding losses

Nitrate Poisoning Concerns

- Nitrogen fertilization during drought increases risk
- Nitrate tests are available for forage samples (Test before feeding!)
- Sorghum-sudangrass, pearl millet, corn, and bermudagrass are susceptible
- Haying or ensiling does not eliminate nitrate problems
- Watch for signs of nitrate poisoning in cattle and treat immediately

Poisonous Plant Essentials

- Scout pastures and hayfields for poisonous plants
- Cattle are more likely to consume poisonous plants when forage is limited
- Quickly recognize and treat signs of poisoning in livestock

Advantages of Early Weaning

- More cows can be carried on a limited feed supply
- Promotes more efficient feed utilization during drought
- Excellent feed conversion of early weaned calves can result in cheaper gains
- Reduces herd energy requirements
- Helps cows to cycle earlier and improves rebreeding rates

Disadvantages of Early Weaning

- Calf management and nutrition must be excellent
- Labor, facilities, and feed must be available for feeding small calves
- Seedstock cattle must wean within defined age windows for breeds to accept data

Early Weaning Calf Feeding

- Start calves with a high-energy, high-protein diet designed for early weaning
- Hand feed starter diet for 10 to 14 days until to 4 to 5 lbs. per head per day
- Gradually increase to self-feeder as total intake increases
- Manage scours and coccidiosis if a problem
- Use a single diet for best performance through normal weaning age

Creep Feeding Considerations

- Will improve calf weaning weights
- Will not greatly reduce pressure on pastures or lactating dams
- Good option when calf nutritional needs are not being met (poor forage quality)
- Early weaning may be a better alternative when forage supply is limiting

Cattle Culling Highlights

- Pregnancy check early to find open cattle
- Establish a preferred culling order (structurally unsound, age and or performance)
- Decide on how deep to cull
- Cull early to conserve forage and feed supplies
- Consider custom grazing and retained ownership options

Hot Weather Management Tips

- Keep water sources clean and readily available
- Provide adequate shade at all times
- Work cattle early in the morning
- Plan nutrition programs knowing that feed intake levels may be reduced

Herd Health Recommendations

- Hot dry weather can increase the incidence and severity of common diseases
- Parasite control programs must address both internal and external parasites
- “Calf Comfort” is a critical component for successful weaning
- BQA guidelines are even more important for cattle stressed by drought
- Nutritional stress will have a negative effect on immune function
- Work with a veterinarian to make needed program adjustments

Adapted from “Mississippi Beef Cattle Producer Quick Reference for Dealing with Drought” and used with permission from Mississippi State University Extension Service.
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