

## **Stocking Rate and Grazing Management During Time of Drought**

When dealing with drought, some of a livestock producer's most important decisions concern stocking rates and grazing management. The effects of these decisions go far beyond survival of the current drought and can greatly influence recovery afterward. Producers who have gone through forced liquidations appreciate the complexity of management decisions to be made and fully understand potential financial ramifications.

Because not two ranches are alike, producers need to make stocking rate and grazing management decisions that will help them reach the goals for their operation. Decisions need to be made not only during, but also before and after the drought.

While managing a cow herd on range or pasture land, remember that forage supply must meet or exceed livestock demand. During a drought, you must constantly evaluate range for to match supply with demand. Now, is that simple to do when there is limited owned or leased land, absolutely not.

When forage supply can no longer meet feeding demands then reducing stocking rates might be the only thing to do. Reducing stocking rates can decrease damage to desirable forage plants, reduce supplemental feeding cost, lower loss of cattle to toxic plants, and help pastures recover more rapidly after the drought.

When de-stocking is a must in order to save what forage you have left you must accelerate recommended or normal culling practices. The first culls should be any spring or summer calving cow that does not have a calf at her side. If a cow calved last fall, winter or spring but lost her calf, then sell regardless of age or pregnancy status. Also included in the first round of culling are replacement heifers that have been purchased or raised but are not already in production. First calf heifers typically wean the lightest calves and have the lowest rebreeding potential of any age class. Also sell cows that are slow to reproduce or that have had lackluster production records.

One mistake that many producers make is culling spring calves fewer than six months or age. This will not have a great impact on you herd forage demand. Calve only consume 15-25% of forage consumed by their dam. However, if cows are in poor condition you might have to wean early in order to help the cow improve body condition before winter and before her next round of calving.

Keep in mind that the decisions you make before and after a drought are just as important as those made during the drought. Producers might want to consider the following strategies when dealing with drought:

- \*Maintain as much carryover forage in good years as possible

- \*Keep stocking rates flexible

- \*Implement a grazing system that allows periodic rest of native or improved pastures

\*De-stock as early as possible. Make adjustments before either the pasture or livestock suffer.

I know that culling cattle is a very hard decision. But, in our industry we must make those tough decisions or we could run the risk of forced liquidations and potentially losing our whole herd. I also know that the cow prices have dropped considerably over the past two weeks. We must consider culling quickly before the bottom completely falls out.