

Dealing with Drought



Drought - 2007

A rapid communications series brought to you by the
Michigan State University Beef Team

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Pasture Short? First crop hay Down? Corn burning up? Looking at some tall feed bills? It's time to take action! Do some planning and be in control. Don't let a little dry weather detour your livestock operation. Here are some suggestions on how to cope with less than normal pasture and winter feed supplies. The quicker you make adjustments, the smaller and less disruptive they need to be. Consider both sides of the equation:

How much feed do you need?
Feed on hand, feed you can produce yet, &
feed you can buy

Start with cattle and feed inventory – where are you as of today? If it starts raining tomorrow, how short of feed will you be? Keep in mind that grazed pastures take 2~ 3 weeks to re-grow and overgrazed pastures will take 4+ weeks to re-grow. Don't overgraze!

What animal management actions can be taken to reduce feed needs?

Wean calves off any cows that were to be culled anyway, and ship those cows, now! Expand cull list to include: bad bags, bad feet, bad eyes, old and marginal performers, cows with bad attitudes, thin cows, other cows that don't fit your program but do it NOW. You can cull open cows and additional cows this fall when you have an accurate winter feed inventory.

Early wean calves. If you have some "good" pasture, put cows in lot on lower quality feed and calves on good pasture with creep feed; if you have low quality pasture, put calves on good growing ration in a lot and put cows back out to hustle their own groceries.

Know the market: It appears that high grain prices will favor heavier feeders and light calves will not see

any significant premium in price. Therefore, if severe forage shortfall, ship more cows, keep growing young-stock to be sold as yearling steers in '08 and bred heifers for '09 calving season and return to similar sized but much younger cow herd.

Sort stock so young cows don't get too thin

Growing & Getting more feed yet this year

Fertilize with 50 lb of nitrogen by August 1 on best grass pastures

Plant brassica crops by August 1, high quality feed good for growing young-stock or to put body condition on cows

Look to harvest old hay fields, corn stalks, other residue feeds, any roughage can be blended come winter

Use temporary fence to limit feed current pastures and graze non-fenced lands

Look for alternative and by product feeds: only limitation is your imagination!

Do monthly inventories:

The quicker you know you are off, the easier and cheaper it will be to correct the feed shortfall. (feed available vs. feed needed)

Monitor cow condition and young-stock gain. It will be costly to feed and not get expected performance

Be flexible & innovative – you don't have to do it like you did it last year! What if 2008 is dry? Build some fertility and diversity into next years feed production program. If you don't make the decisions ASAP, somebody or something will and you may not like it.