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Managing Pastures During Drought

by Chan Glidewell / bcglidewell@noble.org



Exceptional drought in the Southern Great Plains robbed pasture and range managers of the 2011 forage production they were

counting on to get to the traditional winter feeding period. Thus, many are left trying to feed their way through this drought or destock to better match forage demand to forage availability. Prospects for significant fall production of forages are not looking good. Under these extremely dry conditions, it is not recommended that producers undertake any kind of planting operation (overseeding or clean-till) until a significant “filling” of the soil profile with moisture has occurred. Experts estimate that this would take a 6-inch or greater rainfall. There are certain management practices that pasture and range professionals “preach” during times of normal rainfall and forage production. These practices are promoted because they will benefit producers in the good years and help them navigate through the more difficult years such as this one. Following are four best management practices that should be employed over pasture

and range resources at all times.

- 1. Maintain proper stocking rate.** This is the most critical grazing management decision in a live-stock enterprise. Proper stocking rate means matching the actual stocking rate to the carrying capacity of the land. Stocking rate is the amount of grazing pressure applied to pastures from all grazing animals including cows, horses and donkeys. The carrying capacity for a particular area is the amount of forage the land can produce, and this changes from year to year based on precipitation and prior management. Therefore, stocking rate should be adjusted each year to reflect carrying capacity. The stocking rate should not exceed a property’s carrying capacity unless the gap can be economically bridged with imported forage. This is a common practice during the winter months, especially when the property is dominated by introduced pastures.
- 2. Implement flexible stocking.** One management decision that can help a cow-calf producer get through most droughts more easily is to have implemented flexible stocking prior to the drought. That means stocking

significantly below 100 percent of carrying capacity. Instead, set cow numbers at about 65 percent to 75 percent of carrying capacity. When excess forage is grown, calves can be retained after weaning through a backgrounding and yearling operation, or a stocker enterprise can be added. At the very least, flexible stocking should reduce cow herd expenses as less hay is required during the winter. In a normal or above average year, adequate to surplus forage availability going into the winter reduces or eliminates hay costs.

- 3. Maintain proper stubble height.** Maintain grazing heights for bermudagrass above a 3-inch residual height and for native grasses above a 6-inch residual height. Stubble height management can significantly impact the water holding capacity of your land. The shorter that grasses are grazed, the shallower the root systems become. This inhibits the plants’ ability to obtain water that is deeper in the soil profile. It also reduces their ability to act as a water filter when it does rain. Without this filtering effect, rainfall washes sediments (soil) into our ponds, lakes, rivers and streams. Finally, adequate stubble height ►

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on grasses can affect the microclimate underneath the forage canopy. The stubble helps insulate the plants from the extreme heat that lack of moisture creates.

4. **Don't ever stop managing!** Opening all of the gates and abandoning planned grazing management or a rotational grazing program is akin to giving up. Stay in control of the livestock and

continue to rotate them, albeit slower, through your pastures, and continue to provide periods of active rest to the plants. Active rest is allowing the plants to rest while they are growing, which is needed for recovery of plant health and vigor. If hay feeding is required, select a poorly producing, preferably introduced, grass pasture as a sacrifice pasture. Feed

livestock in the sacrifice pasture instead of degrading all pastures equally. Remember: heavy culling or selling of livestock is not the same as giving up – it is a part of managing and best done proactively. In fact, strategic culling and selling of livestock may be the most economically feasible way to survive a drought. ■