

## FORAGE

# Learning From the Drought of 2011

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**The drought of 2011** will not soon be forgotten. It's been a year of record low rainfall and record high temperatures. Figure 1 depicts 2011 rainfall and tempera-

ture for Oklahoma compared to the averages for the last 30 years. And many of you did not receive anywhere close to the 5 inches of rainfall recorded in May. In my travels across the region, I have seen many overgrazed pastures, dried up ponds, springs and creeks that are no longer flowing and wells that have gone dry.

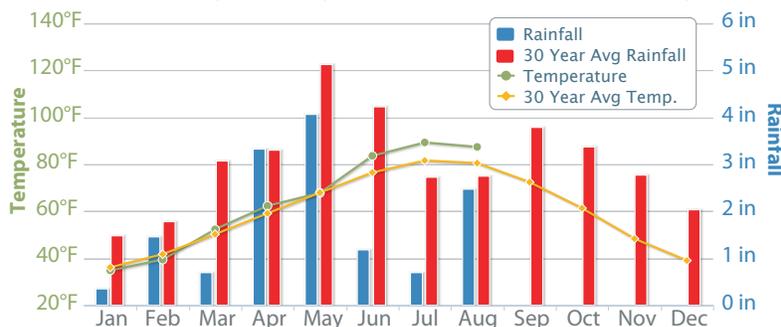
the forecast models are predicting her to strengthen near term which means a decreased chance of rain in Oklahoma and Texas for the coming winter. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the current drought is expected to persist or strengthen through January 2012.

It's time we begin thinking long term and strategizing how we will recover from the effects of the 2011 drought. If you think stocking rates in 2012 will be average if we get average rainfall from this point forward, think again. Perennial plants have been stressed and will need plenty of TLC to recover from the abuse they have received. Consider stocking lightly for the next few years as the wealth in your operation lies in the amount of grass you can grow, not the number of cattle you can run. Take a look at our long-term weather pattern since 1895 (Figure 2) and you will see a striking feature that is definitely worth noting: droughts, or extended dry periods, are normal weather patterns and typically last for five to 10 years. However, starting in the early 1980s we defined a new "normal" and began to believe that rain was always plentiful and adjusted our stocking rates up

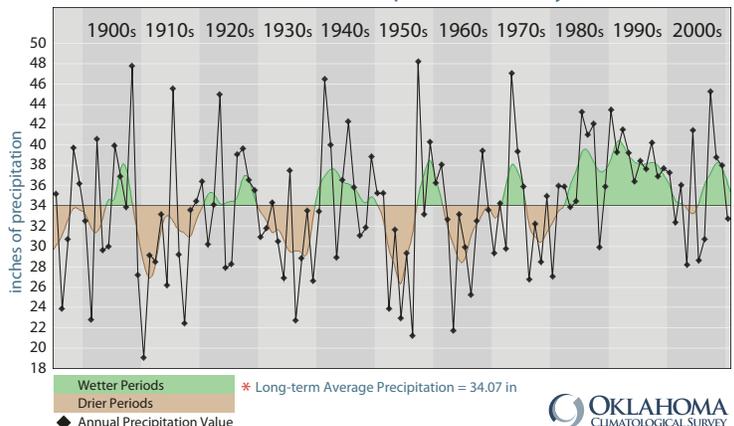
There was some localized rain (2 to 3 inches) in September, but most producers did not receive an amount significant enough to grow late season forage or to be confident in planting winter pasture. So what's in store for the future? La Niña has returned and many of

through January 2012.

**Figure 1**  
Oklahoma Average Monthly Temperature and Rainfall During 2011



**Figure 2**  
Oklahoma Statewide Annual Precipitation History (1895 to 2010)



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accordingly. Unfortunately, I believe this assumption will be proven wrong!

I am obviously not privileged to know what is in store for the future, but looking back at our historical rainfall patterns makes me believe we are going to receive less than average rainfall over the next few years. And that our recent string of wet years was an anomaly rather than a new

“normal” pattern. I hope I am wrong, but what if we do receive less than average rainfall over the next five to 10 years? My suggestion to nearly all the livestock producers in Oklahoma and Texas is to reduce your stocking rates by as much as 50 to 75 percent of what you consider “normal” and strategize how to take advantage of good years when we get them. With

increasing feed costs, you should experience a tremendous increase in the value of the grass you grow. It will be more important than ever to manage pastures for optimum forage production. Please stock conservatively and develop a long-term outlook when it comes to improving the health and condition of your range and pastureland. ■