The drought of 2011 will likely have negative impacts on our pastures that could last for years to come. In addition, the more your pastures were stressed and overgrazed, the longer it will take them to recover. The year 2012 will prove to all of us just how important our grass is to the livestock industry in Oklahoma and Texas. Most producers can easily overcome seasonal or localized drought by feeding hay reserves or buying hay at a reasonable cost, but when drought is regionalized and extended, there is not an easy way to keep production levels high. It is very difficult to sell cows and reduce stocking rates, but our focus needs to be placed on the health of our pastures if we are going to be profitable over the long term. Continued overgrazing will only further degrade the land, causing even more problems in the future.

Some producers received welcome rains in fall 2011 and have seen a tremendous flush of winter annuals. Don’t be deceived and think everything is back to normal. While it’s certainly nice to have forages to graze, these winter annuals will use much of the soil moisture and nutrients, and reduce their availability for our warm-season forages. In other words, if we don’t receive adequate rainfall in late April, May and June, we will find ourselves in the same predicament as last year. I have been encouraging producers to evaluate their historical stocking rates and reduce cow numbers by as much as 50 percent if they haven’t already done so.

Here is a list of strategies for you to consider in 2012:

- Keep a complete and current inventory of your resources, such as hay supplies, cattle numbers and forage growth, and how long these will sustain your operation. Know whether or not you have adequate stored moisture and the amount of forage it will grow. You should critically evaluate your moisture situation on May 1 and again on June 1.
- Plan to rest some of your pastures for at least part of the growing season. A previous article I wrote, Management Guidelines Can Help Improve Pasture Condition, Optimize Forage Utilization (www.noble.org/Ag/Forage/ImprovePasture), should prove helpful.

Many pastures in the Southern Great Plains were severely overgrazed during the 2011 drought. To promote forage recovery, producers should maintain conservative stocking rates and practice intensive resource management.
• Take full advantage of winter annuals. You might consider increasing stock density by combining cows into one herd or using electric fencing to subdivide pastures – especially from March to May.
• Be prepared to control weeds through stock density or herbicides. Start scouting pastures in early April, and know what your target weed species are and what they look like.

• Continually monitor rainfall and forage growth throughout the growing season, and be prepared to adjust stocking rates accordingly or purchase hay.
• If you are going to need hay, secure a source early if you are not willing to reduce your stocking rate.
• Soil-test any pasture you might consider fertilizing. We still have many producers who call us for fertilizer recommendations without current soil test results.

Finally, keep your eyes open and your finger on the trigger in 2012, and stay ahead of the game as much as possible. Do not stick your head in the sand hoping everything will be okay. Have a plan and don’t be afraid to make tough decisions. A wrong decision is often better than no decision at all.

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