

FORAGE

Careful management aids drought survival

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The U.S. Drought

Monitor released on Nov. 20, 2012, shows the majority of Oklahoma and Texas in severe to extreme drought with northern

Oklahoma and the Panhandle in exceptional drought. The drought impact type in these regions ranges from short- (less than six months) to long-term (greater than six months). Areas currently in short-term impact are feeling the effects on seasonal agricultural production. For example, most of the wheat crop is being hurt and grassland production has suffered. Areas in long-term drought are facing severe impacts on grasslands, and surface and subsurface water supplies. To add to this, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration models indicate that 9 to 15 inches of precipitation are required to end current drought conditions by the end of February 2013. However, the seasonal drought outlook is calling for drought persistence through February, and, from February through June, the forecast models are giving equal chances for above, below or normal precipitation.

It is hard to find encouragement when facing current conditions and

the outlook. However, there are reasons for optimism:

- Remaining aware of current conditions, accepting them and looking at the forecast predictions gives you better opportunities for long-range forage planning.
- Pasture and range drought insurance is available. Pasture, Rangeland, Forage (PRF) insurance is a risk management tool developed by the USDA's Risk Management Agency and reinsured by the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation. This program was piloted in 2007 and is based on a rainfall index in Texas and Oklahoma. The crop year runs from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31. Signup for 2013 closed on Nov. 15, but producers should keep this in mind for future use.
- Cool-season annual grass production was excellent in spring 2012. These grasses are again present and with above normal temperatures expected, only need timely rainfall for spring 2013 production.
- Excellent 2012 spring rainfall meant a lot of hay was made. Current hay prices are reported as steady (Oklahoma Hay Market Report, Nov. 15, 2012), indicating that supplies are presently adequate.
- Conditions in 2012 did not help grassland rejuvenation, but grasslands did not appear to experience

additional regression. It is going to take a long time for perennial grasslands to improve and there is no silver bullet for recovery. Rain, rest and good grazing management will continue to be keys to rejuvenation.

- Light insect damage in fall 2012 means greater opportunity to grow more forage with less cost. Expectations for fall armyworm damage were high, but never occurred. Remain on the lookout for armyworms in early 2013, about the time spring forage flush begins.
- The cattle market continues to maintain strength. This is definitely something to be optimistic about. The market is often soft when dealing with drought. At least there has been a strong market during this drought.
- Herbicides and fertilizer can help you grow more forage with less moisture. Look for weed pressure to begin as early as March 2013. Timely scouting, weed identification and use of the proper herbicide at the proper rate will help you grow more forage. Likewise, having fertilizer applied will help grow more introduced (bermudagrass, old world bluestem, etc.) forage with less rainfall. Base your fertilizer applications on soil test reports and forage demand. ▶

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- Expect a spring forage flush. This year it may only be adequate, but we will grow forage in spring 2013. Be prepared to take advantage of it when it comes. Be sure to take off spring flush by the first of May to give warm-season grasses a chance to recover. There will also be opportunities to establish summer annual

short season (crabgrass, sudan, sorghum-sudan) forages that can take advantage of seasonal rainfall. The planting window for summer annual forages is wide, extending into June; but, to take advantage of seasonal moisture, consider getting them in the ground in late April or early May.

Things will get better; until then, producers will need to do an above average job of forage management. This means providing forages seasonal rest, weed control and proper grazing management, and maintaining a grazing rotation. In other words, take advantage of all the tools in your toolbox. ■