

Framing the Challenge

Drought is a serious obstacle to successful range livestock management. Producers must understand how drought affects plants, grazing animals, livestock management, the business finances, and what options exist.

Several factors that affect risk management during drought include:

1. The total population of cattle in relation to feed availability (including supplemental feed stuff),
2. How widespread the drought-area is,
3. The time of year and the likely hood of rain and return to adequate feed supplies in your area and,
4. Current and projected crop and livestock market outlook
5. Evaluation of cash flow needs (borrowing your way through drought to maintain traditional herd size may inhibit long-term profitability).

Questions livestock producers must answer when facing drought:

- Are my cows losing weight or not performing adequately?
- Will I have to start to provide supplements?
- What are the cost/benefit of supplements in today's market?
- If the drought continues, should I cull—when and how “deep?”
- What feeds are available to the ranch?
- Assuming that I will have to purchase supplemental feeds, are they available and at what cost?
- Is one option to sell hay and buy back grain for limit feeding?
- Do I have the feed resources to allow for full feeding vs. supplementary feeding only vs. limit feeding of grain?

A few things we do know and must keep in mind with regard to cow management:

- Fertility of cows may decline when their body condition drops below 4.
- Early weaning of calves is one option that allows cows to rebuild body reserves and rebreed the next year.
- Money and diminishing feed reserves are too valuable to waste on cows that are unproductive, not pregnant or are unsound.
- Production, financial and marketing variables and decisions are all interrelated and ultimately impact the bottom line, and
- You cannot feed your way out of drought.