

The 3 “’em’s” of Drought

There have been too many years of drought when even extension people start getting frustrated. Last year was a reprieve in many parts of the state, but this year has been a return to drought for many.

I'll give my spin on what I consider the best ways to weather drought and plan for the better years to come.

I see three ways to address a lack of forage – sell'em, ship'em, or feed'em.

Sell'em

This one seems to be the most difficult for most ranchers. Being proud of cattle raised is understandable and producers recognize that these cattle fit our environment better than most; however, the sell'em strategy is often not chosen when it may be the most economical and can provide opportunities for change. I recently attended a Bud Williams Marketing School at which instructor Ann Barnhardt asked the following:

Pretend I showed up at your ranch tomorrow and bought all your cattle at market price and then offered you the opportunity to buy individual ones back at that same price. Which ones would you buy back? Which ones would you let me keep? If you'd let me keep some, then why aren't they sold today! Every day you don't sell your cattle, you just bought them at today's market price.

This message is important. It's fine to be proud of your cattle but not to the point it impairs the ability to make sound management decisions. Selling down the herd may provide an opportunity to restock with a different type of animal that better fits a desired marketing plan, the environment, or the desired production system.

A flexible production system that matches the number of livestock to annual forage production has proven desirable during these years of drought. Research shows a cow-calf-yearling operation with this flexibility has been the most consistently profitable operation in the Mountain West. Certainly checking with a banker and tax advisor would be an important step before selling large numbers of livestock.

Ship'em

One of the great things about this country is that somewhere, someone has received precipitation and is looking for cattle. If your wife has been after you to take that much-needed cruise, then I recommend getting on the Internet or the phone and start looking for available pasture. Call an extension agent in a county that looks like they have good grass and find out who is taking in cattle. Call friends and acquaintances in other states or regions and ask about reputable neighbors who may have grass available. Then call in the trucks and send the critters to camp for the year! We have all heard horror stories of cattle under someone else's care, but there are far more successes than failures. Extension has examples of contracts for running cattle that can be used to write a reasonable

agreement that makes clear to both parties who is assuming the risk and expense for all aspects.

Feed'em

Ranchers have to be eternal optimists. If a producer is only marginally affected by this year's drought or there is access to cheap feed, then feeding them through the drought may be a viable option. For most, when the numbers are run, feeding through a drought is not economically wise, however with the high calf prices of recent years this may be a viable option for this year.

If this method is chosen, several tools are available to lessen the amount or cost of needed feed.

Early weaning can substantially reduce the cow's requirements. Weaning as early as 90 days has had great success and should certainly be something to consider in dry years. Limit feeding cows in a dry lot may be much more economical than keeping them on pasture and feeding hay.

Corn is likely going to be a much cheaper source of energy than hay this year as the season progresses. Wintering cows on corn instead of hay can be a real option. It takes a higher level of management and a producer will need to get used to the sound of cows bawling. If you choose to feed'em, make the best use of the feeds available by testing all of them and balancing a ration based on the requirements of your cows. Your University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service (UW CES) educator can assist with this.

Whatever the method chosen to weather drought, remember to take care of yourself and loved ones. Drought creates tough times for producers, but don't let these tough times go too far. The UW CES has publications available to help producers make it through these times. For more information on drought management alternatives, go to: <http://www.uwyo.edu/UWCES/Drought.asp>