

Hunter Nickell

Managing Cattle During Drought Conditions

As we all know, drought conditions are increasing in intensity in the Southwind District and all of Kansas. Pasture conditions are deteriorating, ponds are drying up, and producers are worrying if they will have enough hay to feed their cattle through the winter. According to the UNL Drought Monitor (<https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?KS>), all four counties in the Southwind District are in a moderate drought, with parts of Neosho County being in a severe or even an extreme drought. Scorching temperatures accompanied by little rain in July have made for perfect drought conditions across the area. One of the questions I frequently get from producers is the current price of hay. Hay and all types of forage are a hot topic right now. I wanted to give a few tips on how to manage your hay and pastures going into the winter with current conditions.

The first tip I always try to suggest for putting cattle on pastures is to pay attention to stocking rates. This year, we have had plenty of rain in the area but unfortunately, it all came down at once and the soil wasn't able to save a lot of the needed water for these hot summer months. The first best practice to conserve grass is having the appropriate stocking rates. Stocking rates vary from pasture to pasture and are dependent on the type of cattle, available forage, etc. For a cow calf pair, it is anywhere from 5-7 acres per pair. Again, this number is dependent on lots of factors.

Now what happens when you are in a drought? Like I stated before, your stocking rate will vary. To conserve what little grass you might have, you might have to

dial it back to one pair per 10 acres or even more depending how the conditions are. A great strategy to mitigate the impacts to your grass is to section it off for rotational grazing. For example, if you had a 200-acre patch split into four, 50-acre paddocks, you can rotate the cattle around or even split them into two groups to relieve stress on one paddock itself. While I understand the grass isn't growing right now, rotational grazing is a very valuable tool for producers to utilize.

The fallback options for some producers are to feed hay while they are on pasture. While this is an acceptable strategy, I would caution producers in making that their first option without testing the hay in case this winter is brutal like we have had in years past. One of the most important tools we have at our disposal is forage testing. For example, if you test your hay and you have some excellent quality hay and some lower quality hay, you might give those cattle a lower quality bale and create a feed ration to supplement. Feeding hay in a drought is usually the only option for some producers as rotationally grazing can be tricky and time consuming in situations where water, grass and labor are scarce.

As the drought continues to increase intensity, some producers have had decreased hay yields across the board. Producers all over the country are struggling the bale and/or buy hay due to high demand and lower supply so they are resorting to baling failed crops, such as corn. The issue with baling corn is the potential for high nitrates, which can become lethal to cattle. The best practice before feeding any hay is to test it and find out what you are working with. A hay test is always cheaper than losing part of your cattle herd, and who knows you might even become more efficient when you learn what the protein and energy values are.

If you would like more information or advice on testing your forages, managing your pastures or anything in between just give me a call or an email. I can be reached at 620-365-2242 or nickell99@ksu.edu.

Hunter Nickell, Livestock Production Extension Agent

Southwind Extension District, Iola Office