

Managing Livestock During a Drought

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When Water and Feed Supplies Become a Concern

Drought usually gets its reputation from its impact on crops. But its impact on livestock can be equally dramatic. Hot, dry weather increases the water needs of livestock but often decreases water supplies. Crops may not yield as planned, causing a feed shortage. Consequently, farmers may face special challenges, including decisions about whether to buy feed or sell livestock.

Water Requirements

Water requirements may increase to double the normal intake for animals during hot weather. Clean, fresh water is important. If animals do not meet their water needs, they may refuse to eat, experience lowered production, become sick or die.

Water supplies also may become a problem as the drought wears on. Wells and piping may be inadequate if water demand increases dramatically; shallow wells and streams may dry up. You may need to transport water. Contact your local emergency government office or your county Extension office for information on water supply assistance.

Some general water estimates for various conditions and animals:

Daily water intake for beef cattle at 88 degrees F.:

- a) Cows -16.5 gallons for nursing calves; 14 gallons for bred dry cows and heifers.
- b) Bulls - 18 gallons.
- c) Growing cattle - 9 gallons for 400 lb. animal; 12 for 600 lb.; 14 for 800 lb.
- d) Finishing cattle - 14 for 600 lb. animal; 17 for 800 lb.; 20 for 1,000 lb.; 22.5 for 1,200 lb.

Daily water intake for dairy cattle at 80 degrees F.:

- a) Dry cows (for maintenance and pregnancy) - 16.2 gallons for 1,400 lb. animal; 17.3 for 1,700 lb.
- b) Lactating, 1,400-lb. cows (for maintenance and milk production) - 17.9 gallons for 20 lb. milk production; 24.7 for 60 lb. milk production; 38.7 for 80 lb. milk production; 45.7 for 100 lb. milk production.
- c) Heifers - 3.3 gallons for 200 lb. animal; 6.1 for 400 lb.; 10.6 for 800 lb.; 14.5 for 1,200 lb. (for maintenance and pregnancy).

Average daily water intake for swine:

- a) Breeding herd - 2 to 3 gallons for gestating sows and boars; 4 to 5 gallons for lactating sows.

b) Young pigs - One-half to 1 gallon for weaned pigs (15-50 lb.); 1 gallon for growing pigs (50-120 lb.); 1.5-2 gallons for finishing pigs (120 lb. to market).

Increase amounts for hot, dry conditions.

When Feed Becomes an Emergency

Feed supplies may run low if crops are compromised or lost because of dry weather. Farmers unable to afford additional feed may face an emergency situation. Some considerations include:

Develop an inventory of livestock numbers and feed supplies. An inventory will help you plan for current and long-term feed needs.

Get advice and assistance. When a feed shortage is imminent, contact a nutritionist or your county Extension office for guidance, your lender for early discussion of potential problems or needs and the Farm Services Agency (FSA) for feed assistance program information.

Two major options when facing a feed shortage are to:

a) Buy or obtain additional feed. Feed assistance may be available from relief groups, the FSA or through loans. Volunteer organizations typically offer hay lifts during drought years. Contact your county Extension office for more information.

b) Sell non-essential animals. The money received can help buy additional feed for remaining animals.

Plant alternative crops for forage. A number of crops, including 70-day corn, buckwheat and millet, may be planted mid-summer to offset early losses. (See the fact sheet "Alternative Crops During a Drought.")

Talk about it. Drought can bring feelings of great anger, frustration and hopelessness to farmers, especially for those already experiencing tough financial times. It's critical that producers talk about the stress they are feeling, rather than isolating themselves from family or neighbors. In some cases, intervention may be needed to connect farmers with counselors, clergy members or other professionals.

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