

Develop Drought Strategies Before You Need to Cull Cows

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As the Dickinson Research Extension Center gears up for the summer season, several thoughts come to mind. The biggest thought (concern) is rain.

Spring is soon departing and not leaving the moisture needed to support a productive summer. Calf gains and cow re-breeding may be fine in the early season, but sustenance or forage growth for the summer is lacking.

Probably the number one recommendation at this point is, simply, get a plan. Prioritize your operation and systematically implement needed strategies as the season progresses. Unfortunately, in times of severe drought, not only grass but also watering opportunities become very limited.

Utilizing pastures early in the season, where previous history dictates a shortage of water will develop as the season progresses, should be stocked and grazed early, getting the most out of what grass is available, depending on the grass type. The cool spring has helped for water retention, but also has held back plant growth so, as usual, no simple answer exists.

Given the current price of cattle, producers need to decide whether to hold the cow in a pen or in an account in the bank. The biggest disappointment in beef production is the carrying of marginal cows, only to have a forced reduction later in the summer. Removing a few marginal cows in the spring may mean fewer of the better cows leaving in the fall.

At the Center, stocking rates have been reduced with no excess cows left in the pens. The Center sold nine cull cows and heiferettes on April 29. Three heiferettes averaged 1108 pounds, sold for \$73 per hundredweight and brought \$809 per head. The next two heiferettes averaged 1007 pounds, sold for \$80 per hundredweight and brought \$806 per head. The cows averaged 1393 pounds, sold for an average of just over \$54 per hundredweight and averaged \$758 per head. These were cull cows. They had lost their calves, were difficult mothers or were simply displaying a problem.

Given the short grass, actually, even if we had good grass, they should have gone to market. On April 27, the Center sold 26 head of fat steers weighing an average of 1163 pounds live, bringing over \$135 dollars per hundredweight on the rail for a total per head average of \$952. The difference between the fat steers and the heiferettes was only \$145, with a weight advantage for the steers.

The Center does not claim to be an expert in marketing, often pondering why dollars flow as they do. Is there significant value in marketing surplus stock, given the questionable status of grass? Hauling feed and betting on rain tomorrow is something we all can do, but the plan of the day is to adjust numbers, park some dollars and see where the summer goes.

Rebuilding numbers is not easy. Cash has to keep flowing, but still, living in denial or on tomorrow's wish is just that, a wish. Sound business decisions need to be made now, plans made for tomorrow and hopefully even next year.

Last year at this time, the Center was running 321 cow-calf pairs. This season, the Center has 247 potential cow-calf pairs. As usual, the replacement heifer count is still fairly high. At 100 head, it's a hedge as to what the summer may bring. Soon, it will be time (early July) to ultrasound the replacements and more will be ready to go. For now, get a plan.

May you find all your USAIP ear tags. Kris

Your comments are always welcome at www.Beeftalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0196.

DREC Cattle Sales in Preparation for Possible Shortage of Forage

Cattle Type	Weight	Price/Cwt	Average Value
Heiferettes	1068 lbs.	\$75.80	\$808
Cull cows	1393 lbs.	\$54.38	\$758
Fat steers	1163 lbs.	\$81.89	\$952