

## **Beef talk 765: Prepare for the Unexpected, Live the Expected**

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Spring showers should bring spring flowers and it will. However, the concern for moisture always is present and foremost in most producer discussions. We anticipate rain but that does not mean it will.

Plants need spring rains to establish new growth. Those spring rains also need to be stored in the soil to maintain growth. Do we have soil moisture? The quickest way to determine soil moisture is to dig a hole. Having done that the other day, at least in southwestern North Dakota, the soil moisture is good. There was no end to the depth of the hole because moisture was evident as far as I wanted to dig.

The surface was dry, but some recent rains did help. However, there certainly is increasing evidence that dry conditions may be more the norm than wet conditions.

Instead of digging a hole, there are easier ways to monitor moisture. The National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, produce the U. S. Drought Monitor. The website at <http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/> shows the current week's drought intensity by various shades of color that range from dark red to yellow.

Currently, significant parts of the southwestern part of the U.S. are involved in an exceptional drought. Dry conditions continue up the western states and moves east to Oklahoma and parts of Texas.

Where is the moisture? Another U.S. drought portal that is a cooperative effort between many governmental agencies is called NIDIS, which stands for the National Integrated Drought Information System. The website is at <http://tinyurl.com/droughtmon>.

The variable infiltration capacity macroscale hydrological model is displayed through soil moisture modeling from the University of Washington. The map shows total moisture storage with respect to the long-term averages. Dark green means well above average, while medium and light green indicates above average but not extreme. The red and yellow on the map means below normal water storage, which means drought conditions.

Is the growing season for us going to be dry? As producers, there is no way to control the amount of rain we get, so we are forced to develop management plans that will be accommodating to various levels of moisture. In this planning process, the ultimate question is: How much grass will grow and how quickly will the herd consume the grass?

Of course, this discussion centers on stocking rate and the carrying capacity of the land. Well- established grazing plans should be developed based on long-term averages, not short-term growth.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, keeping the stocking rate constant within established pastures, while allowing the ending grazing dates to vary depending on dryness, has worked well. Removing cattle early, or at least weaning the calves early and only leaving the cows on pasture, lowers a cow's nutritional demands and her intake.

Dry and wet are two very opposite conditions that move about the world impacting the living system we need. In the world of water and plants, as water is withheld, the number of plants contracts. As the world is watered, plant growth expands.

In the livestock world, as the plants die, so do the livestock. As the plants regrow, the livestock herd resurges. That is called nature. For producers, it is called being flexible.

At the center, forage is not lacking today. However, that may not be true by the end of the season.

What it means is that the beef business is and always will be challenging. Producers constantly are trying to negotiate the wet and dry yin and yang. Producers are trying to find that perfect spot that does not exist.

The point of this story and the challenge is that beef producers need to have a plan. In other words, there is the process of slowly changing stocking rates to reflect the changing plant communities in response to changing moisture supplies.

The concept of grazing and stockpiling forage is critical to the survival of the beef operation. There also is the need in many parts of the country to put up hay to accommodate the nongrowing season.

As with all producers, the center embarks on a management regime that adds and subtracts cattle and moves cattle to take timely advantage of how plants respond to moisture. The moisture is not sustainable, but the planning on how to use that moisture is sustainable.

Next week, I'll have some thoughts on moving, keeping or selling cows.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

## **Wet and Dry There is No Constant**

### **Drought and Moisture Maps:**

<http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>  
and  
<http://tinyurl.com/droughtmon>

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