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## BeefTalk: A Cow is Not a Cow, So Plan Now for Potential Summer Dryness

**The key to managing drought is good cattle sorting and modified stocking rates.**

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

A critical part of cow herd management is knowing the typical cow herd is made up of five subunits: 20 percent replacement heifers, 15 percent first-calf heifers, 5 percent dry cows, 10 percent dysfunctional or older cows and 50 percent mature cows.

A cow is not a cow. Each cow belongs to a subunit. Each subunit has a different potential for profit and herd longevity, so get to know these subunits!

### Images

#### A Cow Herd is Not Just a Cow Herd

Knowing Herd's Subunits is Critical  
20 percent replacement heifers  
15 percent first calf heifers  
5 percent dry cows  
10 percent dysfunctional or older cows  
50 percent mature cow herd

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A Cow Herd is Not  
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**[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: How to Prepare for an International](#)**

This spring, like many, has the potential for a dry summer.

According to Adnan Akyuz, Ph.D. and professor of Climatological Practices at North Dakota State University, "The current El Nino lived up to its expectation this winter. It was the strongest El Nino since 1998. The overall winter average was the sixth warmest and 50th driest statewide. Lack of snow cover and dry soil led to unusually warm spring temperatures ranging from 4 degrees to 10 degrees above average so far.

"In the long term, warm conditions will continue all the way through the growing season with the momentum gained from El Nino," Akyuz adds. "Precipitation is hard to predict. However, dry soil usually leads to a warmer and dryer season."

The key response to weather is planning through good cattle sorting and modified stocking to manage drought. Those herd subunits offer managerial flexibility, even when that flexibility is not desired, such as having to decrease stocking rates because of drought. Flexible stocking rates need to be in place prior to turnout to summer pasture with a predesigned penning or cattle allotment that will allow a producer to move cattle.

Let's look again at these potential sorts within the cow herd. As potential replacements, the first-calf heifers (15 percent) and replacement heifers (20 percent) account for more than one-third of the

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cattle inventory. An alternative feeding plan for these subunits adds flexibility to stocking mature cows.

When dry, plan to dry lot heifers and/or first-calf heifers if possible. These subunits also are easier to haul and generally already are sorted, so adjustments are more manageable and, in reality, may be all that are needed to address pending grass shortages.

The mature cow herd is more challenging. Cattle producers need to implement management regimes that add cattle, subtract cattle and move cattle. The key is to envision a plan to take timely advantage of plant response to moisture within well-designed grazing systems, but we are talking cows and calves, which, logistically, are not easy to move.

Here are two suggestions. First, cattle generally are accessible in May or late spring for sorting at branding and spring vaccinations. Do not let potential market beef get out to the larger summer pastures. So sort and market all cows not nursing a calf, including first-calf heifers. Open cows are market cows, so write that on the barn wall. This should reduce the herd by 5 percent.

Second, take a long, hard look at those cows that would be culled in the fall. Start a unit of fall culls in the spring so inventory is in sync with the feed resources. If dryness is the summer theme, then

simply market them as cow/calf pairs; save your feed and let someone else feed them.

The key to any drought-management plan is to cull deeply, and then have a plan that makes those cull cows available logistically to move. Remember, every cow left requires feed. The statement, "I wish I had marketed a few extra cows early!" is all too often mumbled when the dust blows.

During or following calving, spend some time sorting those unsound cows: those with poor udders, poor mothers, wild mothers, ornery cows or cows with any other out-of-place notation in the calving book.

Yes, sorting and regrouping takes some time, but sorting midsummer will take a lot longer and be much more stressful. So keep thinking, "Just how dry will it get?" If rain is doubtful, go through the inventory and add 9-year-old or older cows to the fall cull group. The goal should be to establish a subgroup equivalent to 10 percent of the cow herd.

Accessibility to these cows is critical if precipitation fails to maintain grass growth. Start thinking today! How could one access these cows if needed?

The key to implementing a stocking-reduction plan is to have the cattle available to market. Having to round up the whole herd to pull out a few pairs delays the implementation of the plan and uses up

valuable feed in the process. Thus, more cows and calves need to be sold when one actually does gather the cows.

From a practical standpoint, the producer now has a pending thought process to modify cattle management or reduce the cow inventory. Next, manage according to the plan. Let's hope it rains.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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#### Attachments



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