The Willow Stick and Water – Can't Live Without It

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Most of us know of the water witch. The water witch was someone who cut a suitable willow (or some other tree) branch into the shape of a Y and went looking for water.

The water witch would hold one hand on each segment of the Y and begin walking with the longer tail of the Y in front. Once water was found, the tail of the willow stick would point down and a well was dug.

For early settlers, the water witch was important. Without water, there was no reason to set up camp and plan a home. Water was and still is the major source of life.

Throughout history, water has been a gathering point. Perhaps the most poignant scene in older movies is a caravan of people struggling through the heat of a desert and coming upon an oasis.

The discovery of an oasis is a life-sparing event and is followed by overwhelming joy. The oasis is capable of growing plants in a desert.

Water is near or at the surface, allowing plants, animals and humans to replenish their need for water. Many old Western movies had plots built around water rights. Even today, water is in the news on a regular basis.

The news varies from international boundaries, such as Canada and the U.S., or states arguing over rivers and dams or local irrigation districts checking on their projected reserves. In any case, the shortage of water means only one thing, our world will change.

Things that we do or take for granted no longer will be as we know them. There will be no one asking for long seminars or invited speakers when the water stops.

While that may sound too negative, the demand on water use grows. As new uses slowly or rapidly increase water demand, the long-term effects and impacts certainly need reviewing.

We always can discuss and debate water needs. A question for producers still remains. What does each of us do in our operations to assure a water supply to meet the consistent usage of our operations?

Water is a double-edged sword. Too much water is no good, either. Something in the middle is nice. Unfortunately, the middle is always that very short period of time passing from one extreme to the next.

In southwestern North Dakota, we can look at the long-term average for moisture by utilizing local weather data. Lee Manske, Dickinson Research Extension Center rangeland specialist, compiled historical water precipitation from 1892 to 2005.

Manske noted that the average winter (January, February and March) annual precipitation for the Dickinson area was 1.54 inches. The spring precipitation (April, May and June) was 7.33 inches, summer (July August and September) was 5.30 inches and fall (October, November and December) was 1.88 inches.

If it's not going to rain, it's not going to rain. It is that simple, so the efficient use of the resources that we are given is critical.

To some extent, the difficulty of dealing with unexpected water, which commonly results in flooding, rapid property loss and even death, is routinely in the news. The subtle effects of the lack or depletion of water, which commonly results in a drought, are covered by occasional feature stories, but not news.

In the end, water is not something to be taken for granted and subsistence without water is impossible. As the demands for water persistently increase, there is, perhaps, a wake-up call scheduled somewhere that will sound an alarm. This alarm will not be pleasant to react to.

Yes, corn and other feed ingredients are expensive, but at least it can be bought. Water is different, but more on that later.

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 Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to http://www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet.

Seasonal Distribution of Annual Precipitation (1892-2005)

Season	Inches	Percent
Winter	1.54	9.61
Spring	7.33	45.66
Summer	5.30	32.99
Fall	1.88	11.74
Total precipitation	16.06	

Source: L. Manske, Dickinson REC Rangeland Specialist, www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/dickinso/research/2005/range05g.htm