

For Immediate Release

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Drought Mitigation Plans

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The growing season of 2012 continues to throw curve balls at producers throughout Missouri. The early green-up of pastures and hay fields followed by extended periods of dry weather were a perfect recipe for harvesting cool-season forages for hay. Many producers took advantage of the weather and got significant amounts of hay harvested.

The problem is that the month of May, normally one of our wetter months in the year, has turned out to be abnormally dry. Some areas are experiencing slow pasture and hay field growth due to dry conditions. It may be too soon to ring the drought bell, but that is a current concern for many producers.

Cattle producers might begin thinking about drought mitigation plans should the dry weather extend into the summer months. At a recent meeting, Dr. Justin Sexten, MU Extension Beef Nutrition Specialist, highlighted some management practices that producers could adopt in response to drought.

The first option is to reduce nutrient demand. This is most easily accomplished by early weaning calves. Young cows and heifers should be the first candidates for early weaning, followed by thin cows, early calving cows, and finally late calving cows. Be thinking how to accomplish this task if necessary and decide what you are going to do with the calves after you wean them. Check on facilities, evaluate feeding programs tailored to young calves, evaluate marketing alternatives, etc.

Strategic culling is a second option. Open cows, old cows, late bred young cows, late bred older cows and low production cows are the order of culling.

Forage resources should be inventoried and monitored. Set minimum cover thresholds and remove cattle from pastures reaching that level. Identify a sacrifice pasture or area to abuse. Thin or weedy pastures in need of renovation are good candidates for this. This area can be used to feed hay, if necessary, and then plan on renovating when moisture conditions improve.

Possibilities for filling unmet forage needs include renting additional pasture, harvest accumulated forages, harvesting emergency hay crops such as warm-season annuals, or purchasing hay.

Prioritize forage needs based on stage of production, with late gestation cows in need of additional condition having the highest priority and dry cows having the least priority.

Developing a plan now before a crisis occurs may allow producers to avoid expensive mistakes based on spur of the moment decisions and provide time to prepare livestock and facilities in case drastic actions are warranted later in the summer.

If you have more questions on this topic, contact me at the Extension Center in Warsaw at (660) 438-5012. University of Missouri Extension is an equal opportunity / ADA institution.