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Headline: Drought Feeding Management Options

WARSAW, Mo. – Depending upon where you are in Missouri, short forage supplies may be an immediate emergency or may be mainly a winter feeding problem. Recently, some MU Extension colleagues and I have been holding drought management meetings throughout central Missouri, and more are scheduled. I would like to highlight a few points made in those meetings, which address more immediate forage needs.

In dealing with drought conditions, livestock producers need to be flexible in their management responses. The goal is to provide adequate nutrition for the lowest total cost in order to maintain animal production goals. It is important to maintain adequate body condition on cows throughout the fall and winter so they will calve and re-breed next spring.

Livestock feed requirements need to be matched with forage supplies and forage quality. Management adjustments, such as early weaning spring-born beef calves, limiting hay access, or limit feeding hay plus a grain supplement to beef cows, can help producers manage short forage supplies.

Existing forage supplies should be tested for nutrient content to ensure properly balanced diets can be fed for the lowest cost. Producers should carefully monitor bale weight and pounds of supplement being fed in order to manage feed inventories and control cost.

Reduce feed storage and feeding waste as much as possible. For example, open bottom bale feeders can have feeding losses of up to 20 percent of the original bale weight. Bale feeders with skirting around the bottom of the feeder can reduce this waste by one half or more. Cone styled feeders can reduce hay waste to 3 to 5 percent.

Keep in mind long-term ramifications of drought conditions to pastures. Consider having a pasture or paddock that, if necessary, will be abused now and plan on renovating that area next year. Confining over-grazing damage to forage resources may help more of your forage acres recover and be productive next year. Be prepared to apply appropriate weed control next year if necessary.

Economics cannot be ignored in this situation. Brent Carpenter, Ag Business Field Specialist's message to livestock growers is to consider all reasonable financial options before overspending on hyper-inflated feedstuffs. In the current environment, feed costs per day, at quoted hay prices, are about 2-3 times normal and the feeding period could be twice as long as normal.

Ultimately, producers must address the question of how to know when it is just too expensive to feed cows. It is best to work this out on paper before being forced into a decision. There are tipping points where it makes financial sense to execute a stepwise plan to downsize the herd, starting with cows that will generate the least net revenue in the near future.

These tipping points are unique for each farm. It boils down to how cash moves in and out of the business over several years. One red flag is when costs associated with drought cause additional short-term borrowing. Debt snowballs quickly on a stressed cow-calf operation, potentially to a place beyond an orderly recovery.

This is certainly an abnormal situation, so normal management strategies are probably not going to be effective. The items mentioned above are options to consider, and details can be adapted as necessary for individual producers. If you have questions on drought feeding management, contact me by e-mail at schmitze@missouri.edu or by calling the Benton County Extension Center at (660) 438-5012.

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