

Surviving the drought

Many of you experienced one of the worst droughts in recent memory. Hay supplies are short to non-existent. Here are some recommendations for your cow herd for this fall/winter.

1. Pregnancy check cows and sell open and late bred cows to slaughter. Sell poor producers (MPPA under 90 and cows that had a very poor calf this year).
2. Do not keep heifer calves for replacements. Feed out or sell as feeder calves.
3. Graze all your cornstalks and see if you can rent your neighbors stalk fields. The benefits to your neighbor's fields are:
 - a. Cows will eat corn grain/husks/leaves and turn it into organic matter quicker than without the cows "recycling" it.
 - b. Cows will clean up grass/weeds from fencerows and waterways.
 - c. Iowa State and Nebraska research shows no loss in yield to grazed cornstalk ground vs. that not grazed. A 1200# cow causes almost no compaction to the soil.
 - d. If you as a cattle owner make more money, you'll have more \$ to buy corn for your cattle in future years, so corn price increases.
4. Bale cornstalks that you cannot graze. The ideal situation is to remove the chopper and just bale what comes out of the combine. You will need heavy duty pick-up teeth that are rubber mounted so they have some give to them and won't break as easily. If you use a stalk shredder and bale the entire plant there is a possibility of nitrate toxicity. A safe idea would be to run a test for nitrate to be sure the feed is safe.
5. Don't buy expensive hay to "solve" your drought problem. A 1250# cow will eat about 37# of hay and waste an additional 8-13 # if cows are fed free choice from a round bale feeder. At \$100/ton, that is \$2.25-2.50/cow/day. That simply won't work.
6. Purdue research shows that if cows have access to round bales for only 4 hours/day, cow weight was almost identical to those with 24 hour access but there was 37% less hay disappearance (all wastage). Buy another round bale feeder (cone type are best) so all cows can eat at the same time and then fence cows out except for 4 hours/day. To entice cows away from hay, feed a small amount of grain away from the hay source. (Note – when I told my Dad about this he said, "Back in the early 70's when we had a drought I put the cows on stalks and gave them 2 hours access to the hay stacks and they did just fine and didn't waste a thing." I see now that the 'new' Purdue research was actually about 35 years old!)
7. Look at by product feeds that are available. The best buys are wet gluten, distillers or brewer's grains if you are fairly close to the plants. Dry products from the above list can also be an excellent value. We have producers that use wet gluten, baled cornstalks, limestone and Rumensin that are feeding cows for \$0.56/cow/day.

Compare this to the hay example of \$2.25/cow/day and on a 50 cow herd feeding for 170 days, that's a savings of \$14,365!!

8. A feeder wagon makes using wet by-product feeds much easier to use, but it is not an absolute. If you have a loader tractor you can feed the wet product into a bunk along with any mineral and Rumensin. The forage can be fed in round bale feeders where the cows only get 1 hour of access time per day. Purdue research shows cows will eat 8-10# forage in one hour, so this is plenty if you are also feeding a by-product feed. The key is that you have to have enough hay feeders so all cows can eat at the same time. This works quite easily as the forage supply is fenced off from the feed bunk. At 6 PM, the hot wire is opened and cows go eat the roughage. At 7 PM, the feed is placed in the bunk, the cows walk over to eat and the hot wire is reattached so the cows have no more access for the day.
9. Even if the dry by product feeds are slightly higher in price compared to corn, they are a better value for feeding cows during the winter. Corn is currently \$3.15/bu or \$112.50/ton. The dry gluten and distiller's prices are about \$125/ton currently. The two advantages that the by products have are high protein and no starch. The energy of these products is more 'rumen bug' friendly as they digest more like fiber and the bacteria and protozoa are more efficient in digesting it in a high fiber (hay or stalks) diet.
10. Add 200 mg Rumensin/cow/day to your ration. It will save about 10% on feed intake with the same gain.
11. Soybean stubble or straw can be baled and used for a roughage source. The nutrient value is quite low but it can be a valuable roughage source if a higher quality feed is fed. The ideal use is to mix a small amount (3-6#) with a wet feed by-product or silage. Putting it in a round bale feeder as the sole source of nutrition would not work.
12. Now is the time to plan for pasture renovation for next year. Call your NRCS specialist or Extension educator to devise a plan. Frost seeding next February can pay big dividends next spring.