
DROUGHT PRESENTS CHALLENGE FOR TENNESSEE COW-CALF PRODUCERS

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During the later part of this spring and summer, lots of areas of the state experienced drought which reduced both the amount of pasture available for grazing as well as the second cutting of hay. This has created problems for many cow-calf producers.

In addition to Tennessee, many other areas of the country are experiencing dry conditions. Normally, pasture during the latter part of June on a 5-year average, about 15% would fall in the poor to very poor range during late spring and summer.

The spring and early summer months are when the greatest amount and highest quality forage are available. With the drought conditions and the hot, dry summer normally experienced in Tennessee, it is likely that pasture will be limited and forage available for hay harvesting will also be reduced.

What can Tennessee cow-calf producers do to manage cattle and forage supply to effectively and economically meet the cattle's nutritional needs? Following are some suggestions that should help meet the challenge. Producers should evaluate their individual situation and apply the ones that would be beneficial.

Determine the available feed supply. Be honest. Determine the amount of feed that is available on the farm to meet the cattle's needs. What is the amount of hay available from first cutting? What is the quality of that hay? Determine the amount of the various quality of hays. How much pasture is available? Are there any hays left over from last year?

Is hay being fed now? This might be part of the supply needed to winter the cows.

Determine the number and different classes of cattle that require feeding this winter. What will be their feed requirements? What qualities of feed will be required by the various classes of cattle? Higher quality feed should be fed to growing cattle and lactating brood cows. Producers can now compare this feed requirement to the available feed supply. Will there be enough feed to get through the drought without making changes in herd size? If feed is limited decisions must be made regarding culling, marketing calves, early weaning or purchasing feed.

Consider early weaning of calves. Weaning calves reduces the quality and amount of feed needed by the brood cows. Calves as young as 4 months of age can be weaned and fed a palatable ration of 12 to 14 percent crude protein and 65 to 75 percent total digestible nutrients (TDN). Management of the calves can be a problem. Separate, well-fenced lots or pastures and feeding troughs will be required.

Selectively market calves. Older, heavier calves that are carrying condition should be the first ones marketed. The younger, lighter-weight calves will consume less feed and be more efficient in feed utilization than the older ones.

A systematic culling of cows will stretch the feed supply. Brood cows are the greatest consumers of forage in cow-calf operations. The role of cattle is to convert forage to a more valuable easier-to-market product. If there is limited pasture and hay, it would be to the producer's economic advantage to reduce the herd to match the forage supply. Cows that have lost a calf, cows that are open, cows with physical problems, cows that have a poor disposition and old cows should be the ones to be considered for culling. Reducing the number of cows in the herd would reduce the amount of pasture and hay needed and also

result in a little extra feed for the remaining herd. Receipts from marketing could also be used to purchase feed for the remaining cattle.

Store harvested hay to keep losses at a minimum. Hay stored outside on the ground and uncovered can lose 28 to 33 percent in dry matter. If the hay is kept off the ground and covered, the loss is cut to 10 percent. Use of a barn or shed for storage will reduce dry matter loss to about 8 percent. Storage procedures that reduce losses are economically critical under normal conditions and are even more important during times of limited forage supply.

Feed hay to limit waste. Hay fed without a rack or ring that limits cattle's access can result in up to 35 percent added waste.

This article was not planned to be pessimistic about the feed situation. But, it is always a good idea to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Hopefully, the later summer and early fall will be more favorable to the beef cattle industry and adequate moisture will be available for forage growth to support cattle production.