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**Raising Beef Cattle During a Drought**  
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No one has to listen to the weather reports to realize that we are dealing with a drought. Everyone has ideas of how to effectively raise beef cattle during this time of little water. Many think a drought only affects the forages for the beef cattle to graze; in reality, it affects all different aspects of the cattle industry, from marketing strategies, to feeding and managing of cattle onto healthcare of the cattle.

During a drought, a cattle manager must consider many things on the cattle operation. He must evaluate stocking rates based on forage availability, culling cattle, early weaning of cattle, supplemental feeding of cows, overheating of cattle, shrinking quantities of drinking water, as well as the increasing number of poisonous plants available. Some of these things to be evaluated are easier to manage than others.

When evaluating stocking rates, one must consider if the forage will be able to recover when moisture returns to the pasture. If forage becomes scarce every time that there is a shortage of moisture, the pastures are probably overstocked. If large quantities of forage are available following a drought period, the pastures are probably under stocked. Some sandy spots may appear in a pasture following a drought; however, the entire pasture should not become a beach.

A manager may consider culling the mature cattle to decrease forage demand. Pregnancy rates must be considered; cows that are open, old or those who produce light weight weanling calves should be culled. Doing this will produce a higher quality herd and, more than likely, a younger cow herd.

Another consideration is to wean calves earlier than planned. During a drought situation weaning weights are almost always adversely affected. Some options to offset the decreased weaning weight are to creep feed the calves prior to weaning or to wean early and feed the calves separate from the cows. Cows in early to mid-pregnancy have a lower nutritional requirement, meaning they can maintain on lower quality forage with little supplementation required, if any.

Whether or not the decision is made to wean early, the main focus is to keep the cows in a good body condition so they will breed back. If supplementation is required, a mature cow usually will need about 1 to 1.5 pounds of grain supplementation per day plus forage. Lactating cows have a higher nutritional requirement than that of a dry cow. Besides feeding grains, there are many other options to keep cows in a preferred body condition. Some other options may be liquid supplementation or by-products.

It is important that during hot, dry weather cattle have access to plenty of water. If ponds or other natural water sources begin to dry up, other sources of water must be supplied. Some cattlemen have added ponds along with alternative drinking sources for their animals. When ponds become stagnant and low, blue-green algae can overgrow and poison cattle. One way to reduce the algae growth is to aerate the pond if possible. If not, the pond may need to be fenced off.

Some other ways to minimize the effects of the heat and drought would be to make sure cattle have adequate shade to reduce the heat. If animals are to be confined fans and sprinklers could be available to reduce heat and stress.

As pastures begin to show bare spots, poisonous plants begin to appear. With a lack of forage, animals are more apt to eat plants that they normally would not. The best way to ensure that animals are not exposed to poisonous plants is to view pastures weekly and remove any unwanted plants. Questionable plants should be removed.

The biggest thing is to ensure that animals are taken care of and that they have access to adequate feed sources and water. Ensuring this may require different strategies than normal. Each cattle operation is different; each must find its own cost efficient strategies.