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7-1-1997

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Recommended Citation
Bagley, Clell V. DVM, "Dealing with Drought and Short Feed Supplies for Beef Cattle" (1997). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 1211.
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Animal Health Fact Sheet

DEALING WITH DROUGHT AND SHORT FEED SUPPLIES FOR BEEF CATTLE

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July 1997 AH/Beef/13

1. Weather patterns greatly impact feed supplies for almost all areas of Utah. Both grazing and harvested feed supplies are usually reduced with drought conditions. The hay QUALITY may actually be improved because of the excellent drying conditions for harvest. Taking good care of hay supplies to protect that quality may allow use of less feed in the winter to achieve acceptable results.

2. There are two primary concerns in drought and plans should be made early to consider all the alternatives available in trying to minimize the effects of reduced feed, on these two areas:

a. Effect of reduced feed supplies on the weight gain of calves.

b. Effect on the cows and sending them into winter in poor body condition.

3. Even a mild reduction in feed supplies, compared to normal, may reduce calf gains by 70 pounds from that expected during the normal grazing period. That amount, multiplied by the number of calves involved can add up to a significant economic loss.

Alternatives to consider would be creep feeding of the calves but leaving them on their mothers, or weaning the calves early and feeding them a growing ration in drylot or with access to pasture.

Creep feeding while on their mothers demands easy access for feeding and facilities to insure exclusion of the cows from the creep feed. A concentrate and forage mix has several advantages over a straight concentrate ration. It can help maintain gain rates at normal or even increased levels compared to other years.

Early weaning can produce gains comparable to nursing calves and does not have to cause excessive illness rates. It can also allow the cows to maintain their body condition for winter (at least 40 pounds difference, with 2 months early weaning, even when there was adequate feed available).

The extra feed for calves must be of high quality in either of these situations. They must be observed closely and facilities must be available for early and easy treatment of those which do become ill. The potential economic costs and benefits can be estimated and aid in the decision process.

4. Experience has shown that in moderate forage depletion, mature cattle may lose 65 pounds instead of gaining an expected 92 pounds, during just a 6 week period (while nursing

calves). If the cows were in moderate condition originally, that may not be serious, especially if they have some moderately good feed later in the fall. But, if fall and winter feed will also be very limited, it can have serious consequences.

We are finally beginning to recognize the dramatic effect that cow condition and feed (during pregnancy) has later on calf illness and death rates at birth. The cow ABSOLUTELY must have an adequate amount of all nutrients and be gaining weight during the last 30 to 60 days of pregnancy or we will pay for it with weak, sickly and dead calves. The cow can adjust to a maintenance ration after conception and can endure some weight loss during mid gestation. But weight loss or lack of gain in late pregnancy will extract a cost in the form of calf scours, calf deaths and reduced breeding for the next year.

5. The timing of feeding and what to feed become critical issues in economical feeding of cows and calf survival.

Timing: the last 30 days of pregnancy is most critical, but even the last 60 days is especially important. Direct most of supplement feeding to this period of time or delay calving until adequate feed is available for this period.

Protein: need a minimum of 8% to provide at least 1.6 to 2.0 pounds of crude protein per day; but only growing heifers need much more than that. Some producers waste money on feeding excess protein.

Energy: Cows will not be able to eat enough of some forages in order to get the energy they need. These will have to be supplemented with some forages of better quality or with grains in order to meet their needs. The goal should be to have cows at a body condition of 5. If they are thin (3) that means they would have to gain 150 pounds (75 # per each change of body condition score) plus 50 to 60 pounds of fetal calf growth; so 200 pounds total. To actually achieve that, it must be done over the last 60 to 90 days of pregnancy and will require some good quality feeds to achieve.

6. It sometimes seems that we can ignore the problem of limited feed, and just expect the cows to get by or make it up later. Recent applied research is showing that producers are paying the price, one way or another; either through feed costs or lost production. Planning can allow choice of better alternatives. Weaning the calves early, feeding extra to maintain their growth and allowing the cow to maintain and increase her body condition for winter may be a major, improved investment. This is especially true if we should happen to have severe winter weather, which requires even more feed to compensate for the cold.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert L. Gilliland, Vice-President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University, Logan, Utah. (EP/DF/07-97)