

Although the drought is in full swing, producers should start planning to establish winter pastures now since the planting window is shrinking. The longer they wait, the more difficult will be to make sure that plants get established and there is enough growing degree days or heating units to keep the plants going. One option to consider with late establishment is to plant at a heavier seeding rate than the common recommended seeding rate. If there is a good rainfall in the forecast, the heavier rate will insure quicker cover and will help maintaining soil moisture. At this point, the realized grazing that we expect by late December or early January might be pushed to early February if weather conditions improve. At this late in the season, it might be beneficial to plant in a prepared seedbed or using a no-till drill to increase the soil to seed contact and improve the odds of germination and establishment. If you are running out of time, consider planting a mix of annual ryegrass with fast growing, cold and drought tolerant small grain like cereal rye to increase the chances of much earlier grazing. Producers should withhold any nitrogen application until the plants have germinated and they are at least two to three inches tall. That could keep cost down by waiting until the plant is active to use the nitrogen.



Figure 1. Finding ways to spend less on wintering cows is more important than ever under droughty conditions. While producers pay more attention to alternative and by-product feeds and on least cost ration formulations, managing the amount of hay the cattle eat and minimizing losses is often overlooked.

Once the pastures are ready to graze, avoid the temptation of just opening all gates and let the animals trample the majority of the available forage. Add additional temporary cross-fences such as electric fences to increase the number of paddocks, increase the ability to control graze and rest periods. Winter grasses can withstand heavy grazing if followed by proper rest periods, especially under cold weather where they can replenish above- and below-ground tissues. Be proactive in monitoring the condition of your established winter pastures. Limit grazing appropriately before severely diminishing pasture recovery, health and future production.

Daily feed costs are going to increase during a drought. Buying hay and supplemental feed are practices that are not usually endorsed by our forage program. The ideal alternative feeding program will be meeting the livestock nutrient requirements as close to budgeted costs as possible. When nutrition is not adequate, livestock will begin to lose body condition and will negatively affect their productivity and will require additional expense in feeding to bring them to adequate condition. There could be issues with cycling, abortion, giving birth to light weight calves that could face health issues along with vigor and slow growth. As feed costs increase, and available forages become more limited, it may be necessary to cull some of the older or lower producing cows. Reducing the herd size will allow to concentrate on more intensive management strategies during the drought period. This can also allow to expand the heard with higher quality animals once forage production resumes to ideal conditions.

Quality hay will be a valuable commodity and needs to feed wisely and carefully throughout this winter season. Remember that the price of hay can vary considerably due to the type hay and cost of transportation. There might also some opportunity to substitute some feeds for others in certain areas. I would recommend to do some shopping for reasonably priced commodity feeds, but keep in mind that prices might be different than what you have been used to in the past. The goals of supplementing commodity feeds during drought periods is to keep body score conditions that will allow the cows to get re-bred, maintain beef production and minimize the feed cost per animal.

Summary – Drought develops progressively and not overnight. Management for forage resources during a drought depends on the balance between stocking density and the availability of feed hay or provide supplements. Be smart, make decisions based on logic and not on emotions. You can protect your herd by making decisions that are less sensitive to drought such as assessing the body condition of the herd, feed inventories and the financial resources available. It is important to develop a feeding program that will give you the most mileage from the feeds already available in

your farm and supplementing them appropriately. Contact your county agent or nutritionist to determine if your strategic feeding plan is meeting the livestock nutrient requirements. Underfeeding nutrients decreases animal performance while overfeeding nutrients increases feed expense and reduces the net return. Make every effort to reduce feed losses by feeding properly and providing the quality feed to the livestock that will require the greater level of nutrients. Consider substituting commodity feeds for hay only when these substitutions can balance the ration more adequately at a lower price.

A large number of counties in Mississippi has been declared disaster areas and qualify for federal disaster programs. Make sure to keep records and retain receipts of hay and feed purchased above and beyond your normal feeding period. Some of these programs may be retroactive and will require appropriate documentation to validate losses and receive compensation. Contact your local Farm Service Agency for more information in which federal programs might be available in your county.

Upcoming Events

January 22-24, 2017—American Forage and Grassland Conference, Roanoke, VA

February 1-3, 2017—Cattle Industry Convention & NCBA Trade Show, Nashville, TN

February 10-11, 2017—Mississippi Cattlemen Convention, Jackson, MS

For detailed information related to upcoming forage events please visit:

<http://forages.pss.msstate.edu/events.html>

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