

Drought: Déjà vu All Over Again

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It has been said that there are two things in life that are certain, death and taxes. Drought may need to be added to the list for those of us who live in the South. It is truly amazing the dichotomy that can exist across the United States with certain regions in worsening drought and other areas with enough rain to float a Navy aircraft carrier. Hopefully, the situation has improved for both parties by the time this reaches readers, but the following thoughts are still at play.

It is the middle of the autumn season and most cow-calf and stocker producers in the Southeast and Southern Plains are generally grazing stockpiled forage. This is not likely to be the case this year as high temperatures and limited moisture put an abrupt end to summer grazing and fall forage stockpiling. Limited fall forage means many producers have already had to reach into hay stocks to feed cattle which could lead to several discussion points. The thought at the top of mind is if there will be enough hay to feed cattle through the winter. The next thought will be how to avoid this same situation in the future.

How often does drought influence forage production? This question could be answered several different ways, but the answer for the purposes of this publication will be based on the weekly forage and range conditions published by USDA. This publication rates the percentage of pasture in excellent, good, fair, poor, and very poor condition from the beginning of May until the end of October. Over the past ten years and as of this writing, 259 weeks of pasture and range conditions have been reported. Looking at values for the Southeast, 37 percent of those weeks (95 weeks) have had 15 percent or more of pastures rated poor or very poor. As of the end of September 2019, 42 percent of Southeast pastures were rated poor or very poor. Simply put, poor pasture conditions from drought is not uncommon.

Since drought and poor pasture conditions are not uncommon, what are producers doing to reduce risk exposure to these conditions? What are the plans to make sure there is enough feed resources to get producers to next spring? What can producers do each year to reduce risk exposure to drought conditions and reduced forage production?

The first thing every producer should look at is the current stocking density. How many acres of quality pasture are available per hundredweight of cow? In Tennessee, stocking 600 pounds per acre is a good starting point and then adjusting based on conditions. Stocking density is a factor of forage type and season. Annual forages tend to be higher producing forages than perennials, but a moisture shortage can bring production of both to a halt. Cool season and warm season forages are also a consideration. The Deep South will primarily utilize warm season forages while the Mid-South producers can probably generate more forage production with a mix of cool and warm season forages.

Production management decisions such as stocking rate and forage mixture should be the first things all producers consider when managing forage risk related to climatic conditions. Next, producers should evaluate the availability of additional feedstuffs whether that be in the form of hay or commodity feeds to maintain proper nutrition for cattle.

Though managing and having a plan for forage shortages will go a long way in managing forage and feed risk, another alternative for producers to consider is Pasture, Rangeland, and Forage insurance (PRF). PRF is an insurance product through the Risk Management Agency arm of USDA that provides indemnity payments if rainfall in a two month period is less than the selected coverage level based on historical rainfall.

Even if the drought conditions have subsided by the time this is read, it is almost a guarantee that the readers of this article will experience another dry period that significantly reduces forage production. There is no reason to not already have a plan in place and to implement best management

practices to reduce the impacts of drought. Drought is something that is navigated too often to not have some form of plan in place. It can get expensive if not prepared.