

Drought Management: A Long-Term Grazing Plan

Strategies for dealing with drought should be a permanent part of every grazing plan.

You can't plan for a drought once you are in the middle of it.



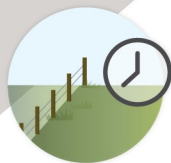
Foster plants with **healthy, deep root systems** that can reach subsurface moisture.



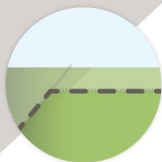
Leave litter (plant residue) to shade and insulate the soil surface, reduce temperatures and minimize moisture loss.



Plan to graze pastures with **higher grazing-tolerant plant species** first. (e.g. crested wheatgrass)



Extend rest periods for pastures by using cross-fencing and rotational grazing.



Keep a rested pasture with adequate carryover in your grazing rotation to provide a forage reserve.



Balance stocking rate with forage supply. (e.g. weaning early, identifying and selling culls early)



Stockpile sufficient feed supplies during years of surplus.

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Alternate Feeding Options



- **Cereals can be grazed** approx 4-6 weeks after seeding, and heavily stocked to use all available growth.
- Cattle may also **graze failed hay and annual crops**. If possible, graze grass hayland rather than legume forage stands. Legumes will provide much better regrowth potential than grasses if rains do return.
- **Creep feeding** may be an option to supply adequate nutrition to calves while reducing demand on cows and pastures.

Managing Stocking Rates



- **Sending animals** to rented pastures in other locations not affected by drought.
- **Remove calves and/or cows** from pasture and feeding conserved forages, crop residues and/or grain in confinement (drylotting).
- **Marketing yearlings** earlier than originally planned.
- **Weaning calves** earlier. Dry cows can be maintained on lower quality pastures or with supplemental feed sources.
- **Culling the cow herd** earlier and heavier; including less productive cows, late calvers, poor temperament, and older cattle.
- **Limiting retention of replacement heifers**. This should be a last-resort consideration, as this can have the greatest impact on future productivity.

Control Water Sources



- **Graze any pastures that could possibly run out** of water first. It may become necessary to use a portable stock water supply, in some cases.
- **Fence-off water sources** and pump to a remote site, such as troughs, to improve water quality and reduce water losses that occur when livestock have access to non-fenced sources.
- **Test water** to ensure that it is safe for cattle consumption.

Winter Feeding Following a Drought



- If winter feeding includes bale grazing, **assess the pasture and distribute bales** where you would like to add nutrients through manure and urine.
- Consider the best methods to **reduce feed waste**.
- Feed the lower quality roughages to cows in the middle-third stage of pregnancy. **Save the better-quality feeds** for periods before and after calving and for growing cattle, such as replacement heifers.

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References

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- ⁶ Government of Alberta. 2012. Range Management during a Drought.

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