

Back-up plans needed for grazing in drought conditions

By Roger W. Tacha,
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It DID rain this year, and the range actually greened up and grew! We all hope the relief from the severe drought continues. However, we will not and should not soon forget the drastic conditions we experienced over the last five to seven years.

We obviously cannot make it rain or snow, but we CAN make back-up plans (contingency plans) for the NEXT YEAR if it does not rain. A contingency plan for drought comprises several factors — some are just normal range management topics, and some are specifically for the drought itself.

ANIMAL NUMBER (stocking rate) is the factor most commonly in the limelight. Most producers reduced animal numbers by 10 to 100 percent during the recent drought! If it is not green, it is certainly not growing! Cull EARLY. Cull HEAVY. Good record keeping tells which animals go first.

Conservative stocking rates in both wet and dry times are a wise management tool to prepare for the very looming, long-term drought. It will likely take years for the range grasses to rebuild root systems and vigor after what they have been through. If your math and forward planning says you can maintain a certain stocking rate for the upcoming year, try it. But if things start looking bleak, reduce numbers quickly.

ANIMAL TYPE is another factor. Diversifying to run both stockers and cows gives a lot of flexibility for dealing with no rain. Stockers are readily “disposable”. However, adding stockers to a cow operation means initially reducing cow numbers, and this sort of move means planning for it months ahead. If this sort of “change” is a knee-jerk reaction to drought about one-third of the way through the grazing season, it is probably already too late.

WEANING TIME — another factor. Removing the half-grown youngsters from the range a month earlier than “normal” might mean the cows get two to four weeks more grazing before they’re out of groceries too. This is admittedly short term, but it

adds a little cushion before you take the next step (which could be one of several things).

SUPPLEMENTAL FORAGE may be feasible — or it may be just “fooling yourself” depending on what and where the feed is. If there is a nearby crop field with residue, volunteer, or weeds, it might be feasible. If it is about the end of the normal grazing season, even actual feeding might be absorbable. But if it is mid-summer, consider carefully!! This is an expensive quick fix.

TRANSPORTING the herd to “parts unknown” could be an option. It has been done, but this too will likely be very expensive.

GRAZING ROTATION SYSTEMS are certainly a valid and proven tool, both in and out of drought. Many are using them. They work! Predicted available grazing days for each individual pasture can easily be calculated PRIOR to the grazing season. Right along with this, the needed REST for each pasture is determined. THE REST BETWEEN GRAZING PERIODS IS WHAT MAKES THESE SYSTEMS WORK!

The grazing days and resting days hinge on a combination of all these things: stocking rate, length of grazing period, grass species, grass production, and number of grazing cycles during the season.

COMBINING HERDS might be another possibility. If adequate water is available to serve a higher stocking rate, this tool will automatically allow more REST to all pastures.

DEFERRED GRAZING is simply not grazing a certain pasture. This can be incorporated into a regular grazing system, whereby a different pasture is deferred each year. Potential benefits are winter grazing area, stock-piled forage for drought, improved wildlife habitat, and fuel-load buildup for prescribed burning. Obviously, this needs to be planned months in advance. It is feasible and a smart management option.

Monitoring climatic and ecological factors can provide TRIGGER POINTS which can help to predict the chance of whether or not to take contingency plan actions. Moisture received to

date to “normal” amounts can then be tied to the amount of grazing period remaining. Seventy to 80 percent of grass growth has already occurred by mid-July. By making these moisture-production comparisons, if there is a serious forage deficit, it should be evident.

Again, with the exception of rain, all the factors listed above are ones people CAN control. Rather than reacting to drought with possible bad decisions, developing a contingency plan is a proactive

way to start NEXT year’s grazing.

If you would like to learn more about contingency planning or would like help in developing a plan, please contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or conservation district office located at your local county USDA Service Center.

For more information about natural resources conservation, visit the Kansas NRCS Web site at www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov/.

Poster, essay contest winners chosen

Norton County students were given the chance to color, draw posters and write essays about conservation and what it means to them.

In the coloring contest for kindergarteners and first graders, James Sturgill took first, Henry Boutwell placed second and Connor Haresnape was third.

The poster winners were:

- Second grade — Shane Cozad, first; Jace Ruder, second; and Trenton Chisham, third;
- Third and fourth grade — Lizzie Smith, first; Baylee Miller, second; and Kristin Stewart, third;
- Fifth and sixth grade — Darci Bainter, first; Tanner Furbush, second; and Kortney Cunningham, third.

In the limerick contest, Wyatt Wentz, Eisenhower Elementary, took first, while Jared Bohl, Eisenhower Elementary, placed second

and Dalton Miller, Eisenhower Elementary, placed third.

Winners of the essay contest were Jared Shelton, first; Bryce Baker, second; and Hannah Pollock, third.

Each of the winners are to be given a plaque at the Norton County Conservation District’s annual meeting on Saturday, Jan. 19 at the Norton American Legion. The meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. with dinner.

All of the first place winners will have their posters sent to the state competition.

Two Norton County students in the 2006 contest placed in the state competition last year. They were Dalton Miller, an essay contest winner, and Carson Wallace, a poster contest winner. Both will receive certificates and medals at the annual meeting.

Little things can make a big impact on wildlife

Reprinted from “Wildlife Habitat Basics”
NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute

Sometimes it is the little things you do in life that count. That can be the case with good fish and wildlife habitat.

Everything you do, or do not do, on your land has an effect on the wildlife you share it with and the fish in the streams and rivers. Just letting plants grow taller, rather than clipping close to the ground, gives more cover for wildlife. Or, letting a few weedy plants grow results in more insects for young birds.

If you think about leaving food or cover for wildlife and fish as you manage your land, ponds, and streams, you are on your way to doing the little things that can add up to having a major impact. Here are some suggestions along the way:

Grass and hay fields — Leave stream sides, ditch banks, roadsides, grassed waterways, and other odd areas undisturbed or wait to mow until after the nesting season, usually from April to July.

Add flushbars to mowing equipment. Mow hayfields from the center to the outside, giving wildlife a chance to escape to field edges.

Crop fields — Use no-till or conservation tillage to provide cover and food for wildlife in winter.

In cropped wetlands, leave residue during the fall and winter for waterfowl habitat and shorebirds.

Leave a few rows of standing crop along field

edges to provide wildlife food. Maximize the likely survival of pheasants, quail, and other birds by leaving these rows next to large tracts of grasses, trees, or other habitat.

Smart pest control — Use integrated pest management practices to minimize fish and wildlife exposure to pesticides and encourage beneficial insects, bats, raptors, and other species to help in reducing crop pests.

Maximize odd areas — Make full use of non-farmed areas by establishing habitat used by the wildlife you want to see on your farm. Use native grasses as well as forbs and legumes. Lightly disc a portion of your grasses early in the year. A new growth of annual forbs will encourage insects and produce seeds for pheasants, quail, and other wildlife. Plant native trees and shrubs to produce fruits and nuts. Leave dead trees standing in woodlots to provide nesting and foraging sites for woodpeckers and other cavity nesting wildlife. Put up bird houses, bat boxes, and other artificial nesting structures.

For more information, please contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office or conservation district office located at your local county USDA Service Center or visit the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Management Institute’s Web site at www.whmi.nrcs.usda.gov/ or the NRCS Web site at www.nrcs.usda.gov/.



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