



Colorado State University Extension Golden Plains Area Extension

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Drought, Plan Your Response

With the national weather shifting from the El Nino to a La Nina pattern, over 80 percent of Colorado finds itself in some form of a drought situation. This triggered the State Drought Mitigation and Response Plan phase two to be activated. This also activated the Agricultural Impact Task Force which will conduct an initial assessment on physical and economic impacts and recommend mitigation opportunities. Cow/calf producers should have a thought out and well developed plan to deal with drought. A plan that ties to the economics and grazing resources under the ranches control. The cow herd can be thought of as the “Factory Unit,” but without the forage input and land to put the factory on a producer has limited options for economic success. Drought plans should involve a series of trigger points to help the operation make strategic and thought out positions when dealing with drought. This allows producers to make calculated decisions that take into account forage and soil health, tax situation, cow herd genetics, long term recovery and ranch profitability. Emotions can drastically affect the decision making process during drought, by responding to preset trigger points ranches can respond without having the desperate “all or nothing” decisions.

Measuring parameters need to be established to determine trigger points. The easiest measureable parameter for most operators is the amount of precipitation or rainfall through the winter and spring. Just as important is the timing of moisture. Moisture after the cool season grass species growing season does little to improve range stocking rates. It is certain that the amount and timing of rainfall immensely impacts the forage produced in a given year. With this in mind, trigger points need to be established accordingly. For example a ranch may normally receive 50 percent of its annual rainfall by July 1, but at that date this year rainfall is only thirty percent of normal. A significant decrease may trigger the ranch to early wean calves to decrease cow forage and nutritional demands.

Another example would occur if on October 1 the ranch has received only 50 percent of its expected rainfall. This could trigger one or more of the responses that no replacement heifer calves are kept, or all cows over nine years would be sold. Such moves should be seen as an opportunity to increase the productivity and efficiency of your cowherd. Other actions that could be associated with trigger points may be to cull cows below a body condition score of 4, or cull the cows that weaned calves weighing in the bottom 25 percent of the heard the past two years. Actions taken during drought plans should target efficiency such as reducing average cow age, shorting calving period, or removing cows with higher maintenance requirements.

It is important to have a number of trigger points and reasonable responses. The longer a drought continues the more aggressive producers need to be to reduce grazing pressure on the ranch. Producers

that sell prior to a necessary drought liquidation phase, and when indicators tell them to do so, usually receive higher prices for their cattle. This gives those same producers a better position financially to restock and land more time to recover. It is important to remember that feeding your way out of a drought is expensive. Seedstock producers may attempt to do this to preserve the valuable genetics that they have developed, but in a commercial situation it can be costly to maintain the core herd genetics during periods lasting over a year. During multi-year droughts it may become imperative to remove all grazing from the rangeland, and available hay and alternative forage most likely will be expensive in such a situation. Ranches that have a responsive drought plan, are proactive, and understand managing to stockpile standing forage during wet years are better able to react to a drought. It is economically important to have plans, record important information, and be responsive when facing drought to make sound decisions and decide on the spur of the moment. The Colorado State University Extension ABM team has created some decision tools to help producers that can be found at <http://www.wr.colostate.edu/ABM/decision.shtml> website. The “Buy Hay or Sell Cows” and the “Strategies for Cattle Herd During Drought” spreadsheet tools can assist producers with making the right financial decisions for their operations.

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