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UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI EXTENSION
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First person column ...

Managing Pasture during Drought

Even though December began with some moisture, mostly in the form of ice and snow, the last two summers of dry weather are on the minds of livestock producers.

Summer droughts are really more common than not in southwest Missouri. While the current dry weather patterns have been more severe than normal, in reality our part of the nation will have six to eight weeks of drought conditions nearly every year.

With any seasonal production problem, producers need to spend time now developing ways to deal with conditions that disrupt forage production.

Livestock producers should develop a pasture management system that will help move cattle and other livestock through these conditions as economically as possible.

The most common question producers have is, "What can I plant that will grow in a total drought?" Unfortunately, the answer is nothing. There is no silver bullet that will help in all dry weather situations.

Instead of looking for the best dry weather forage, it is important to develop both short and long term strategies to combat drought.

Short term management strategies begin with monitoring pasture supply closely.

Producers must avoid over grazing. All forages have a grazing height that producers should not go below.

It is important to know the forages that are available on your farm and manage them accordingly. Even summer grasses like sudangrass and pearl millet will produce more total yield if they are grazed or hayed properly.

Along with monitoring pastures, another short term strategy is to start feeding supplements earlier in the season in anticipation of dry conditions. Feeding hay earlier may extend limited pasture well in to a dry spell during the summer months.

Finally, although it is not the most desired strategy, stocking rates may have to be reduced if conditions are severe.

Long term planning also needs to be developed in the winter months.

First, if pastures have been thinned from drought conditions, use this time to over seed and incorporate legumes into pastures. Deep rooted legumes will not only improve the quality of pastures but will also survive dry soil conditions for a longer period of time than many shallow rooted grasses.

The second long term strategy is to convert about 25 to 30 percent of your acres to a warm-season grass. This will not only help with dry weather planning but will also have the added benefit of reducing the effects of fescue toxicosis from our most commonly planted cool-season grass.

A third long term strategy is to watch for favorable prices of reserve supplies of feed. Hay prices this last season have been anything but favorable for purchasers, but opportunistic producers should keep an eye out for good quality supplements throughout the season.

As with anything, if you wait until everyone is looking for hay, then you probably won't get the best price.

Finally, develop a simple rotational grazing program. Over the last several years many producers have adopted rotational grazing systems. These systems, depending on how elaborate, can increase forage use from 30 percent to as high as 60 percent.

While next seasons' drought seems like a long ways away, it is still a very good time to start thinking about strategies that will work on your farm.

Even if we don't have a dry spell in 2007, you can bet we will experience a drought sometime in the very near future, so make plans now to manage the forage on your farm in order to get the most out of the investment you have made.

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If you need specific forage information, contact Jay Chism at the Barton County Extension office (417) 682-3579. Chism has been with MU Extension for two years. He has a bachelor's from Southwest Missouri State University and a master's in horticulture from the University of Missouri. His work experience includes three years with Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage as the grounds supervisor/facilities manager, overseeing a \$1 million landscape operation, including on-site greenhouses; teaching greenhouse management courses at Crowder College; and helping develop a horticulture program at Franklin Technical School in Joplin.