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Are You Ready for a Drought with Sheep and Goats?

NEOSHO, Mo. – Drought conditions in Missouri present some unique challenges for sheep and goat producers according to Dr. Jodie Pennington, small ruminant educator with Lincoln University Extension.

The main concern is making sure sheep and goats have feed and water. If a producer's financial situation is challenging already, adding the cost of feed can put the operation in the red.

“The drought may cover much of southwest Missouri but may be less severe in other areas. Does a close neighbor have hay or grain for sale or a wooded area where the sheep and goats may go? It is worth asking,” said Pennington.

Selling the animals present a challenge as well because the summer months are usually the worst price months for small ruminants.

“It is worth considering what prices will be after the drought and what tax implications there are for selling now,” said Pennington. “It may also be time to consider what effect your action will have on your long-term viability. It might be worth visiting the bank manager right now.”

IMPLEMENTING A PLAN

An option is to lease or loan your animals to a neighbor or relative who has extra feed, especially if they have a wooded area with a lot of vegetation.

“The plan for a drought does not have to be implemented all at once and should be flexible to allow for changes. It may rain tomorrow but you must plan for the worst,” said Pennington.

Presently, crossbred hair sheep and goats at Crowder College are in a wooded part of old Camp Crowder, but the feed there is rapidly disappearing.

Two major factors with sheep or goats in a wooded area are predator control and the cost of fencing. The fencing should keep the animals in the lot and the predators out of the lot.

“The costs to move animals should be considered. Another concern with the movement of animals is the likelihood of exposure to diseases,” said Pennington.

Taking sheep or goats to another farm in another area where the drought is not as bad might be another option worth considering. However, drought feeding requirements of sheep and goats depend on the type of sheep and goats and quantity and quality of feed available.

In pastures grazed by cattle, there may be additional forage available such as weeds and brush that can be used by goats and sheep. In other cases, goats and sheep may be turned in on brush and undergrowth to provide part of their nutritional needs.

KEYS TO CONSIDER

Observations: Sheep and goats need to be watched closely during a drought. They need to be monitored for body condition to be sure that they are not getting too skinny. “It is much better to feed to maintain adequate body condition than to let the animals get too skinny where they will not bring much money if you sell them,” said Pennington.

Water, Shade and Housing: Sheep and goats may not need housing other than trees in the summer but shade and water are essential. “If sheep and goats exhibit signs of being heat stressed, both water and energy allowances for maintenance should be increased to allow for the extra energy needed to cool the body,” said Pennington.

Feeding: Drought feeding should be started before the sheep and goats lose excessive weight and before any permanent production loss in kids is sustained. “It is also essential that animals be observed more carefully as they are more apt to wander across the fence and to other fields when adequate forages are not available to them,” said Pennington.

Changing feeds: Before starting to feed grain to sheep and goats, feed good quality hay if it can be found. It is important to avoid sudden changes in the ration. Good quality hay or pasture should be at least 30 percent of the feed and should be 100 percent of the diet, in many cases.

“If it is necessary to feed grain or use a different grain, mix the old grain with the new, gradually increasing the concentration over at least a week. Feeding processed grain to sheep and goats can increase the incidence of bloating and can cause animals to go off feed,” said Pennington.

MORE INFORMATION

“In summary, watch sheep and goats closely in a drought and start providing extra feed before body weight loss is excessive. If necessary, problem or lower producing animals may be sold to allow more forage for remaining animals,” said Pennington.

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