

An Unequal Distribution

Based on feed supplies, producers are deciding to keep or cull their herds. For some, just finding feed is a challenge.

Story by
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A cattleman's bottom line is heavily dependent upon the weather. While some producers are feasting on ample rains, others are experiencing drought-induced famine. Two areas, the Midwest and the Northwest, show the disparity in rainfall distribution this year. While Midwestern producers have had a pretty average year in terms of moisture, producers in the Northwest are dealing with very dry conditions that are affecting their herd management decisions.

"Across the state of Wyoming, we have a lot of microenvironments," says Douglas Hixon, who is a former Extension beef specialist and current head of the Animal Science Department at the University of Wyoming. "Depending on where you are, it changes in terms of severity of the drought. We have some areas where people were extremely hard-hit." Other areas, he says, were affected only somewhat.

"Typically, our plant people tell me that they can pretty well determine in April if we don't get moisture, then it's going to be a pretty tough year from the standpoint of forage growth," Hixon continues. "In the northwest and north central parts of the state, they were extremely dry through that time frame."

"It was very dry this year throughout most of Wyoming and the surrounding area," says Harlan Hughes, professor emeritus at North Dakota State University and owner of Western Edge Consulting, Laramie, Wyo. "Overall, we are quite short," he says, adding that he estimates precipitation levels could be down at least 30%-50% in some areas of the Northwest.

Hughes says the drought areas in Nebraska and Kansas appear to be on the western sides of the states. The eastern halves are in pretty good shape.

In parts of the Midwest, rainfall and feed supplies are at about normal levels.

Kern Hendrix, Extension beef specialist at Purdue University, says, "Some farmers may have to make some adjustments, but as a rule, in Indiana I would say that our hay supply is going to be fine." He says there will be less hay than a year ago, but that's partly because 2000 was a year of high production.

"We've been really fortunate to have some excellent fall weather," Hendrix says, adding that the late moisture stimulated grass growth, which allowed producers to extend the grazing season.

"People are taking advantage of extended grazing with a little bit more fall pasture growth, not having to dip into their winter feed supply as early as they normally would have," he says. As a result of the extra pasture growth, he adds, some producers are able to retain more cattle going into the winter months.

The need for feed

In December, ranchers at the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association meeting told Hixon they were culling rigorously, in some cases selling some older cows that might have had another calf or two in them before they would normally be sold.

"You obviously don't keep anything that's not going to have a calf, and you get rid of some of those that have been a little marginal," he says. "You try to reduce the need for feed."

Hixon urges producers to allocate the nutrients they have available in terms of which animals will need them the most. An example would be replacement females, which need to be at an appropriate nutrition level and weight in order to breed, he says.

"Another thing people can do in terms of driving down their cost per pound of calf



"We have an abundant supply of corn grain," says Purdue University Extension beef specialist Kern Hendrix. "It's a relatively low-cost item, so it would not be a problem in the winter for people to do some substituting or do some supplementing of lower-quality hays with some corn grain. It would probably be less costly than purchasing additional hay." [PHOTOS BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL]



"I think we'll probably come out of this dry weather cycle with a higher-quality cow herd in terms of our region or state, because people have culled more rigorously," says former University of Wyoming beef specialist Douglas Hixon. "If we can build those numbers back with enhanced genetics, obviously we are going to be ahead in the long run."

produced is to retain fewer replacement heifers,” Hixon says. “From the standpoint of making ends meet, sometimes you have to sacrifice some of those things.”

If producers haven’t sold their replacements as a cost-saving maneuver, he recommends they prioritize providing adequate nutrition to attain an appropriate prebreeding target weight — approximately 65% of mature weight — and maintain adequate body condition.

“Feeding an ionophore, such as Rumensin® — which is approved for brood cows — may enhance efficiency and allow you to redirect some energy resources. If you do that, you can skip a bit on the older cows,” he says. “The ones that are going to be the most critical are going to be your 2- and 3-year-olds. Feed them separate from your older cows. If you’ve got thin, older cows, put them in with your young cows.”

However, Hixon adds, no matter how sophisticated the nutritional program, a good manager should continually monitor cow body condition, which is affected by weather conditions. Then they should adjust the cow’s nutrient intake accordingly, he says.

Shortage solutions

In addition to heavy culling, many producers in the Northwest are looking for feed sources, Hixon says.

“Hay is extremely expensive — if you can find it,” he says, adding that he also discussed with producers at the Wyoming Stockgrowers meeting the feasibility of using byproduct feeds.

“With most byproduct feeds, the thing that determines if they are economical is how much freight you have to put into them — how close you are to the source. They can be an excellent nutritional resource, if you don’t have to haul them very far. Once you do that, the cost goes up considerably.

“I encourage people to look at pricing feedstuffs on a cost per pound of nutrient they need to supply, whether that’s protein or energy,” he continues. “They can be very reasonable and attractive if you’re located fairly close to them.”

Hughes says he thinks producers need to do everything they can to get feed to their cows.

“When you have a drought during high prices,” he says, “you want to keep as many cows as possible, and bring the feed to the cows — or even take the cows to the feed. Having a drought with \$100 calves is a whole lot different than having a drought with \$60 calves. The reason for the difference is, with \$100 calves, you do everything you can to maintain that core cow herd. With \$60 calves, you’re liquidating cows.”



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If producers sell cows now, the tax laws will require them to buy them back within two years, Hughes says. “I would anticipate that bred cattle prices could be substantially higher in two years. So they’ll sell low and buy high. That just doesn’t work. If you can’t get feed, then you just can’t get feed. I would be willing to truck some feed in — some fairly expensive feed — just to keep that cow herd together.”

If producers are running low on groceries for their cows, Hixon advises them to take a look at some of the available feed alternatives in their area.

“It varies so much from one area to the next in terms of what they might be able to buy hay, corn or a byproduct for,” he says. Producers need to meet the animal’s nutrient requirements and still make it reasonable from a cost standpoint, he says.

“Price feedstuffs based on cost per pound of protein, cost per pound of TDN (total digestible nutrients), cost per pound of phosphorus or mineral on a dry-matter basis ... that way you take the moisture thing out of it, because there may be differences in terms of dry-matter content,” he says. “You price them on an equal basis, and you know for sure that you’re getting the best deal. Of course, nutrient availability, convenience and potential wastage are additional things producers might want to factor into cost.”

Using corn

Although his state doesn’t grow a lot of it, Hixon recommends producers who are running low on feed resources to think about substituting some corn into their cattle’s diets.

“You can put a fair amount of freight on

An affected cattle cycle

Harlan Hughes, professor emeritus at North Dakota State University and owner of Western Edge Consulting, Laramie, Wyo., says the drought has affected the cattle cycle.

“If you look at the national data, we have slaughtered more beef cows this year than we did last year. And it’s drought-related,” he says. Even though in this stage of the cattle cycle you would expect cattlemen to hold back fewer cows, they are culling “fairly deep” in some herds.

“Naturally they’re trying to cull their older ones,” Hughes explains. “The net result is we are going to have fewer beef cows on January 1, 2002, than what we had in January of 2001.

“It’ll result in stronger prices next fall,” he says. “As long as we keep decreasing, we’ll continue to have strong prices. We think we’ll have strong prices for the next two to three years. And that’s built on the idea that we will start holding back some of the 2001 heifers. It could be interesting to see what happens with these 2001 heifers. If we feed them or if we breed them — that is the big issue.”

corn right now, and it's still a pretty reasonable source of energy," he says.

"Per pound of TDN, it's still probably the cheapest thing we have going," Hixon says, adding that up to 5 or 6 pounds of corn can be substituted for an equivalent portion of energy (TDN) from hay.

However, along with the corn, producers must feed an average quality hay that meets energy and protein requirements and doesn't negatively effect rumen microbes, he says.

After these needs are met, Hixon says producers can then use wheat straw or some other low-nutrient feed to keep cows content.

"It's easy to move grain," Hendrix says, adding that the extra hay Indiana producers might have available for sale is commonly packaged in round bales, which are bulky and oftentimes weathered.

"Grain is one of the things some of those producers probably should consider when they're short of forage," he says. If producers have 75% or less of their normal re-

quired winter feed supply, they should give some serious thought to using some grain, he says.

"A lot of times people may not have very good feedbunks, which we think is pretty critical, at least in this area, most of the winter, to try not to feed it on the ground," Hendrix says. "But at least put it in some kind of a bunk to save trampling and mud."

He advises feeding some corn every day to stretch the hay supply, rather than feeding larger amounts two or three times a week.

"It's pretty common to feed a small amount to a cow. But, to feed large amounts is a little bit more of a challenge," he says, adding that it also can create problems, especially if a producer's hay is low in protein.

"So people do have to be careful that there's not a shortage of protein when they start adding much corn to the diet, because we reduce the digestibility of the hay considerably any time we do that," he says.

Hendrix also points out that there is always a potential for foundering if cows are

fed large amounts of corn. Other options, such as dry gluten feed or soybean hulls, provide a supplement for low-quality forage, he says.

"Sometimes these feeds can be obtained for equal to or even less cost than corn. One of the advantages that they have is they are highly digestible, high-fibrous feeds. They work better with high-forage diets than does corn, because the starch in the corn is what can create some digestibility problems with the forage."

For more ideas, Hixon suggests that producers consult with their local Cooperative Extension office.

"The unique aspect of Extension is that they should provide unbiased research-based information. They're not selling a product. I realize that industry certainly has some expertise that can help people, but quite often they're also selling something."

