

FEED, SHIP OR SELL

Producers have three options to reduce stocking rates.

by Aaron Berger, Nebraska Extension Beef Educator

Current drought conditions are prompting cattle producers to consider options for reducing stocking rates on rangeland and pasture as we look forward to this summer.

There are three main options to reduce stocking rates: supplement/substitute feed, ship cattle to nondrought areas; and sell cattle.

Supplement/substitute feed

Feeding cattle on pasture can reduce the amount of forage cattle graze. This option is likely best-suited for use on perennial planted pastures where nonnative species such as smooth brome grass, orchard grass, fescue and wheatgrass have been established. These species tend to be more resilient should overgrazing occur.

Research conducted by the University of Nebraska at the Agricultural Research and Development Center has shown that feeding a mixture of modified wet distillers' grains and ground cornstalks in a 30:70 ratio (dry-matter basis) replaced grazed grass on approximately a 1:1 basis. In this study, cow-calf pairs were delivered 15.7 pounds (lb.) of dry matter of the feed mixture daily.

Feeding high levels of low-quality forage (ground cornstalks) with the modified distillers' grains is necessary to reduce intake of grass. For more information on this study, see "Supplementing Cow-Calf Pairs Grazing Smooth Brome grass" in the 2015 *Nebraska Beef Cattle Report*.

Drylot feeding of cow-calf pairs,

replacement heifers or yearlings is another option to replace grazed forage. Removing cattle from drought-stressed rangelands and pasture will help to minimize damage to grass plants, allowing full recovery more quickly when the drought breaks.

Several long-term studies have been conducted on drylot feeding of cow-calf pairs by the University of Nebraska. For more information, see the "Drylotting Beef Cows — A Drought Management Strategy" web page at beef.unl.edu.

Relocate

Often, when one part of the country is experiencing drought, other parts are not. Currently many states to the south and east are not experiencing drought conditions to the same degree.

When considering shipping of cattle to other locations for grazing, carefully take into account all of the factors involved. Risks associated with cattle performance, death loss and biosecurity for breeding cattle returning to the operation should be evaluated.

Sell cattle

There are several factors that producers should consider when deciding which cattle to retain and which cattle to sell:

- ▶ What are the plans and the outlook for the business?
- ▶ Which enterprises in the operation have been profitable in the last several years?
- ▶ How would selling cattle affect the cost structure of the business?
- ▶ Is now a time to make changes to the enterprises that make up the operation?
- ▶ Within the herd, what age groups and classes of cattle will likely depreciate the most over the next two to four years? Which ones are most likely to appreciate in value?
- ▶ What age groups of females retained now would best position the operation to take advantage of anticipated higher calf prices when the drought breaks?
- ▶ What are the tax implications for selling cattle due to drought conditions, and what opportunities may that provide?

Under drought conditions, selling breeding cattle early usually will result in higher prices being received than waiting until other producers are marketing cattle also. Strategically thinking through which cattle to keep and which ones to sell can help producers position themselves to make the best of a challenging situation.

Earlier this year, Nebraska Extension presented five webinars on drought management. They are available at beef.unl.edu. |

Editor's note: Aaron Berger is beef systems extension educator for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which provided this article through its *UNL BeefWatch* newsletter.