

Grazing In A Drought

Be Conservative With Pasture, Forage Projections

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Despite periodic snow and rain events this winter, much of South Dakota and Nebraska is still under serious drought conditions. And even with a normal precipitation year, it will likely take years for agricultural land to recover from 2012's hot, dry weather. That's why Bruce Anderson, forage specialist with the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Neb., advises farmers to be conservative with their goals for pasture and forage growth this year.

"When spring finally arrives, all pastures will green up like normal, I hope," he said, "but don't let that first growth fool you. Below ground, many plants still are suffering from last year's drought."

Anderson says that during normal growing conditions, most pastures will lose more than half of the root density. Drought further reduces root growth, even without the burden of grazing. So, producers are coming into the 2013 growing season with severely limited plant resources.

Roots need to be able grow deep enough to reach moisture and nutrients in the soil, and that root growth directly links with plant health, spring pasture green up, and season-long pasture quality. Too heavy of grazing too early in a pasture's drought recovery will result in poor pastures even in a normal, or above-average, precipitation year.

It's important for producers to not underestimate the damage their pastures have incurred or how long recovery might take. Anderson advises producers to reduce stocking rates by at least 20 percent on improved pasture and up to 40 percent on rangeland, as well as to delay spring turnout for a few weeks to provide more plant growth to begin repairing injured roots. When animals are finally allowed pasture access, he recommends shorter grazing time and a longer rest between grazings. This can be achieved through managed grazing, which further improves pasture quality with balanced grazing distribution and carefully timed rotations through paddocks.

"When you do graze, always have a couple healthy leaves remaining to harvest sunlight to energize growth," Anderson said.

Furthermore, he adds that producers would do well if they don't plan on grazing through the entire growing season without adding other forage opportunities. Ideas in-



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL
It was shearing day March 18 at the Firefly Meadows Farm near Fairfield, Neb., in preparation for spring lambing in the pastures. While spring green-up is typically right around the corner in April, many producers are wondering what their pastures will look like following last year's severe drought that put plants into early dormancy months before the end of the growing season.

clude saving winter wheat or alfalfa to graze, and planting oats or summer annual grasses like sorghum, sudangrass, and millet.

"Summer annual forages can be a great resource and insurance that you have enough feed for your livestock," Anderson said, but don't wait. "It seems too early to be talking about these summer grasses, since we usually don't plant them until late May or June, but if you think you might need to use these grasses to supply forage for your cattle this year, buy your seed soon."

The reason is because the seed for these grasses is grown mostly in Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma and Texas — states that were hit hard with the drought, too, and the seed production was greatly reduced, so supply is tight. Foxtail millet is already sold out in most areas, Anderson says, as well as sudangrass, sorghum-sudangrass hybrids, forage sorghum, and pearl millet.

Alfalfa may also be challenging to grow this year. Although alfalfa roots are designed to withstand drought, last year's situation still managed to exhaust older dryland alfalfa stands and producers saw the effects when their alfalfa stopped growing far too early in the season. Because subsoil moisture levels have not recovered, this year's alfalfa growth will be determined by how much rain falls during the growing season. Unless this year turns into an above-average precipitation year, it will not be enough to recover alfalfa yield.

"It takes about six inches of water getting into the soil to grow each ton of alfalfa hay," Anderson

said. "If you get real lucky, 90 percent of the rain you receive will actually end up in your soil. And most growers lose at least 20 percent of the potential yield due to losses during harvest. Putting these numbers together, it could take at least 25 inches of rain just to yield three tons of hay. That's if it all goes well."

This means that there may be just enough alfalfa this year to graze to extend pasture, but to put up some for the winter or to sell, but yields won't be back to normal, and there won't be enough left over to renew the winter hay supply.

With this in mind, producers may have to get creative to get through the grazing season. Anderson suggests taking a look at oats and Italian ryegrass.

"I like oat forage," he said. "It grows during spring when we are likely to receive rain and when moisture is used efficiently to produce forage. Oats can be grazed earlier than anything else you plant this spring. Once it gets five or six inches tall, it quickly can shoot up to a foot tall in almost no time."

The downside is that oats is a little tricky to manage grazing on: If allowed to grow too much, which doesn't take long, it doesn't regrow much after grazing. Anderson advises starting grazing on oats when it is six to eight inches tall and then to keep regrowth at six to 16 inches.

Oats also requires a light stocking rate, only one animal per two acres, although stocking density can often increase as oats growth does, Anderson says.

To extend the oats grazing season, many producers mix it with Italian ryegrass, he suggests. While

oats' prime is early on, Italian ryegrass doesn't start growing until June but will continue with high-quality grazing through the fall if the weather holds up.

Another idea that many producers may be considering to boost forage growth is fertilizing their spring pastures, alfalfa stands, and summer annuals, but Anderson says to remember that fertilizer applications require moisture to activate.

"This spring, subsoils are dry and forecasts aren't promising," Anderson said. "Most pastures will produce less grass than normal unless we have a very wet season. Plus, nitrogen fertilizer is expensive. Still, we need as much extra and early pasture as we can get."

The best option is to fertilize spring, cool-season pastures, but the initial green-up isn't the time to do it. Fertilizing works best if delayed until May, in order to encourage growth that can be then used to extend summer grazing. Also, unless the spring weather changes dramatically to become much wetter, Anderson suggests applying a lower-than-usual amount of nitrogen. Waiting until May will also help producers to better judge moisture conditions and whether the full amount of fertilizer is worth applying.

"If it doesn't rain, fertilizer dollars will be wasted," Anderson said.

All in all, although precipitation has improved over the winter, the area's drought conditions continue to persist, and even if this year's weather was able to rebound, pastures and forages will be slow to recover. It's important not to overestimate how productive this year will be.

"Don't risk long-term pasture injury for short-term feed gains," Anderson said. "Manage grazing to help pastures recover from last year's stress."

South Dakota and Nebraska producers can learn more about how to plan for post-drought grazing through an upcoming webinar hosted by South Dakota State University and UNL. The webinar will focus on taking an inventory of the forage available and then using that to estimate the grazing potential of the pasture. It is a free, one-hour webinar starting at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, March 27.

"Now is the time to start the planning process," said Kalyn Waters, SDSU cow/calf field specialist.

"Having the right tools and knowledge to do so will make a world of difference."

Learn more at <http://igrow.org/news/managing-drought-risk-on-the-ranch/>.



Local Grower Is Winner In Corn Yield Contest

ST. LOUIS — An area corn grower has been honored as a state winner in the 2012 National Corn Yield Contest, sponsored annually by the National Corn Growers Association.

Prairie Creek Ranch of Yankton placed third in the state in the No-Till/Strip Till Irrigated Class with a yield of 261.4564 bushels per acre. The hybrid used in the winning field was Pioneer 34F07.

The local grower was one of 421 state winners nationwide. The 2012 contest had 8,263 entries from 46 states. Of the state winners, 18 growers — three from each of six classes — were named national winners, representing 13 states.

The average yield among national winners was 316.3 bushels per acre — greater than the 2012 U.S. average of 122.3 bushels per acre. Nine of the national winners recorded yields of 300 bushels or more per acre.

"Despite the fact that 2012 was a challenging production year, individual growers continued to provide a showcase for American production agriculture," said NCGA Chairman Garry Niemeyer, a corn grower from Auburn, Ill. "While the national corn yield average declined more than 24 bushels per acre in 2012, the average yield in this year's contest actually increased by more than three bushels per acre as compared to 2011."

"That's why this contest and its focus on safe, advanced corn production methods are so important," Niemeyer continued. "The top yield in this year's contest — a tremendous 384.4 bushels per acre achieved by David Hula of Charles City, Va., — is a testament to these efforts."

SDSU Extension Hosts AI School April 9-11

BROOKINGS — SDSU Extension will host an Artificial Insemination (AI) school beginning April 9 in Watertown at the SDSU Extension Regional Center.

The hands-on portion of the training will be held at the Glacial Lakes Livestock facility (south sale barn) in Watertown. The registration fee covers all materials that will be needed for class. The registration deadline is April 1. To register, contact Warren Rusche, SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist at 605-882-5140 or Warren.Rusche@sdstate.edu. If Rusche is not available, contact Jan Rounds, SDSU Extension Regional Center Secretary, to get signed up.

To ensure that students have plenty of hands-on time, the class will be limited to the first 20 people to sign up. There will also be a waiting list in case of cancellations.

Checks should be made out to SDSU Extension and mailed Watertown Regional Extension Center, Attn: Warren Rusche, 1910 West Kemp Avenue, Watertown, SD 57201.

The school will be taught by George Perry, Extension Beef Reproduction Specialist, Jim Krantz, Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist and Warren Rusche, Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist.

AI school Schedule: April 9 Meet at the SDSU Extension Regional Center in Watertown (1910 West Kemp Avenue) registration and pre-survey 12:30 p.m. 1 p.m. Introduction, Cow anatomy, heat cycle and AI technique, Heat Detection Process, AI synchronization protocols/emerging AI technologies, Equipment and Semen handling, Practice on semen handling/practice on cow reproductive tracts

April 10 Meet at Glacial Lakes Livestock, Watertown, Jct HWY 212 and 20 8:30 a.m. Start gathering cows 9-11:30 a.m. Practice AI session 11:30- Noon Clean-up Noon to 1 p.m. Lunch 1 p.m. to approximately 5 p.m. Afternoon session will be held at the SDSU Extension Regional Center and will cover bull selection/EPDs/Fertility and Management

April 11 Meet at Glacial Lakes Livestock, Watertown, Jct HWY 212 and 20 8:30 a.m. Start gathering cows 9-11:30 a.m. Practice AI session 11:30-Noon Clean-up Noon to 1 Lunch 1 p.m. to approximately 4 p.m. Afternoon session will be held at the SDSU Extension Regional Center and will cover Reproductive Management/Nutrition Considerations, Managing Cows for Optimum Reproduction Efficiency.

Commentary

Fewer Corn Acres Are Expected In 2013

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

The surveys are coming in with acreage predictions for 2013 and it appears that there will be fewer fields planted to corn this year but more soybean and wheat acres, according to the Allendale brokerage firm. USDA's prospective planting figures don't come out until March 28 and wheat production numbers won't be finalized until May, but Allendale reports that a record number of producers in 33 states participated in their survey this year, giving their 2013 prediction high credence.

I remember last fall when there was speculation in the Yankton area that producers would be looking at planting more wheat to try to offset the frightening yields they were getting from their corn and soybeans. It sounded plausible, but when I looked into it, agronomists were a little doubtful that the wheat would hold up to the drought we were experiencing. As it turned out, though, while this winter started out drier than some seasons, we have seen periodic snow and rain activity since the beginning of the year, and it seems to me that precipitation events have become more frequent as time went on. With any luck, we'll settle into a normal spring pattern and maybe, just maybe, have a really nice wheat harvest.

The corn and soybean numbers puzzle me a bit. I figure that the corn numbers might be a little lower, because last fall was so disheartening but soybean yields were

just as dismal, so I'll be interested to see the possible reasons for while farmers are shying away from corn but not soybeans. I would think it might be a good risk to grow corn, because the demand is still so high — as high as it was before, plus the need of so many ethanol plants currently shut down and livestock producers who are still gasping at the price of corn.

Just from my own unofficial survey, it looks like there will be fewer alfalfa acres this year, too. Many producers have told me that they're reducing their dryland alfalfa stands until soil moisture conditions improve dramatically. Pastures are in a sorry state, too. Many livestock producers seem to be hanging on by a thread, but I still hear of producers thinking of expanding. They're trying to predict when the weather will turn around, because if they can

time it right, the market price will be really good. As for me and my husband, we reduced our livestock way down and we're just planning on keeping the numbers way down for another couple of years. We figure it'll take that long, at least, for the pastures to recover if weather returns to normal.

Actually, our pastures look pretty good compared to our neighbors' but not real great compared to a normal year. We usually try to graze year-round, and we still did this year, but we were also supplementing hay — which we usually keep only for when there's snow covering the grass — to try to save the pastures. There are just the tiniest hints of green out there, but I wonder just how green it will get. So much of last year's growing season was brown.

Ah, well, I guess we'll see how it

goes. So many ag experts are warning us to go at it slow, be conservative with goals and management and risk-taking, and to treat this year's growing season like we're in a drought whether it ends up being a repeat or not. We're in a delicate position — never before in our recordable history did we have such a hot, dry year as we did last year and sink into as severe of a drought as we did so quickly. We can't have any assumptions that we'll be able to bounce back quickly. It looks like we're in drought recovery for the long haul ...

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