

Dealing with drought

(Updated 6/16/2020)

According to the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) entire or parts of 18 counties in eastern and northern NY are considered abnormally dry. So far the rest of the state is classified as not dry. However, in the Finger Lakes Region we have not had significant precipitation during the month of June. The extended weather forecast provided by CattleFax indicates that June- July will be hotter and wetter than normal. So the moisture conditions could improve. Yet, thinking and planning for a drought should be considered. The following was adapted from Doo-Hong Min, Michigan State University Extension and Derrell Peel, Oklahoma State University.

Pasture

1. **Minimize overgrazing.** Overgrazed pastures weaken plants, expose soil to more heating and loss of moisture. If you normally leave 3” of when rotational grazing increase that to >5”. This will help forage plants recover from drought stress and regrow faster next spring.
2. **Avoid clipping.** In dry conditions, clipping like overgrazing can weaken plants and remove insulation effect, thereby drying the soil further.
3. **Use sacrifice paddock(s).** Instead of grazing every pasture, set aside a sacrifice paddock where hay is fed to minimize severe drought damage. This sacrifice paddock should be the old, low yielding/quality pasture that needs to be renovated or reseeded.
4. **Watch U.S. drought outlook.** Keeping track of the forecast may help you plan your next move when managing pasture lands. The [U.S Drought Monitor](#) is a useful tool to get an idea about current drought conditions and the impact it may have in the short and long term.
5. **Apply fertilizer.** Right after a drought-ending rain, applying nitrogen fertilizer (50 pounds N per acre) can help the drought-stressed grass hay fields and pasture recover faster and store more root reserves for the long winter. Soils should be tested for phosphorus and potassium and amended as required.
6. **Plant cool-season annual forages to extend grazing season.** Some producers plant cool-season annuals such as forage brassicas (turnip, forage rape or kale) and small grains (rye, wheat or oats) to extend grazing season. Although forage brassicas are not drought tolerant crops, they can be planted in late summer.
7. **Control stubble height.** To restore healthy forage stands, it is important not to graze or harvest drought-stressed forage plants too short in the fall. It is desirable to leave six inches of stubble before entering winter. This also helps to catch moisture replenishing snow and encourage re-growth in early spring.

Livestock

1. **Identify older or cows** without a calf that are likely culling candidates and consider culling early. Cull cow prices are seasonally higher now than they will be later in the year. Early pregnancy testing can help identify cows that could be culled early.

2. **Make a priority list** of how additional liquidation will be implemented if necessary. This should include older and open cows, growing replacement heifers, pregnant heifers, mature cows and so on.
3. The list should include **action triggers**, which could be specific dates or based on forage conditions, that will initiate the next phase of liquidation.
4. **Early weaning** of suckling calves will reduce forage requirements of lactating cows and stretch limited forage reserves this summer and fall. These calves may be marketed early or moved into a drylot or semi-confinement backgrounding program. The feasibility of early weaning must evaluate overall economic potential as well as the availability of facilities, labor and equipment to feed and care for calves in a growing program. In general, supplemental feed supplies are plentiful and inexpensive this year and may provide more flexibility for cattle producers to stretch forage supplies.
5. **The tradeoff** between buying feed or liquidating animals is always economically tricky and inevitably wrapped in emotion that can cloud sound decision-making.

According to Dr. Peel: *“Failure to plan for deteriorating drought conditions will lead to easier decision-making...simply because fewer alternatives will be available.”*