
Coping With Dry Weather

Dry weather truly challenges our dryland crops. As time goes by and corn crops are really being hurt, we are not yet ready, in most cases, to give up all hope of a crop. Then we reach the point of having the possibility of 50-60 bushel corn crop. That is -- if it rains now! Even if it fails to rain we may not want to automatically chop all the foliage and start feeding cows or buy calves. These are a couple of reasons for this statement.

Beef cows are a difficult enterprise with which to earn a profit. Over 60% of the costs are feed costs. Feed choices need to be cost effective. Even if the corn is free in the field, corn silage harvest, packing, and feeding costs can be too expensive unless average quality hay prices have moved up to the \$65-70 per ton rate or higher.

Backgrounding and feeding cattle is often only profitable when cattle prices move in a favorable direction. Using cheap feed is likely to have little to do with potential profits. If the cattle can be priced for protection, the use of these drought feed options would be more interesting.

Cattle feeders or dairy operations might want to look at the opportunity to utilize these feeds, even to the extent of harvesting a few extra tons. Drought damaged corn silage is very close in nutritional value of regular corn silage. We would expect them to be 95% or higher of that of regular corn silage. The biggest problem is the reduced tonnage. Drought damaged fields are likely to yield 6 tons per acre of silage versus the 12-15 tons we might have in more normal years.

Nitrate problems are real and need to be considered. However, most nitrates are located in the lower parts of stalks. Cutting three inches higher, combined with the 50% reduction of nitrates expected in the ensilaging process greatly reduces the threat. The most IMPORTANT factor in dealing with feeds with potential for nitrate accumulation in forages is to transition the cattle over to this feed over a two or three day period. Testing feeds is recommended, but no matter what the test tells you, transition in feed changes are critical.

Grazing of drought damaged corn is a valid harvest method, which greatly reduces costs. The cattle will be eating leaves for quite some time before they get to the stalks, which might have more nitrates. Grazing corn will be most effective if portable fencing limits access and knockdown of the feed. Anyone who has chased cows in a corn field knows they can knockdown a lot more than they eat.

Cow-calf operators need to look closely at the option of early weaning calves. Feed efficiency is greatly improved if feed is not being used to produce milk and then produce calf. Cows can fare better on the declining feed quality in pastures. Weaned calves would be expected to do very well in the lot or corn field grazing.

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