

ON THE RANCH

Nebraska Grazing Conference

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Future Forage Potential for Cattle on Pasture

It's time to face reality. It's dry, chances of significant rain are slim, and even if it does rain you still will be short of pasture. Sometimes it's hard to face reality. You think you'll receive more for your cattle if you wait to sell. You think they will grow faster when fed this pricey supplement. And you think you soon will receive rain to relieve your pasture shortage.

Are you being realistic? Let's be honest, it's dry and pastures are short. But even if it rains, will your pastures grow enough to meet the needs of your cattle? If your pastures are based on cool-season grasses like needlegrass in the Panhandle or brome and bluegrass in eastern Nebraska, rain will only help a little. These grasses have already been growing over three months this year so they are reacting like it is mid-July instead of mid-June. For the next ten weeks or so they are going to be almost dormant due to summer heat. Very slow growth no matter how much rain or fertilizer they receive. What you have standing in the pasture right now needs to support your cattle at least until September. If it can't, you need to obtain more feed or remove some animals. That's reality.

What about warm-season grasses, like in the Sandhills and many areas of southern Nebraska? Here there is a little more hope, but only a little. These grasses do most of their growing in late June and July. They need lots of rain in the next couple weeks. Even if they get it, though, total production won't catch up with your usual expectations.

This news isn't good, but I doubt that you're surprised. And don't expect that planting something into dry soil will help. Nothing grows without water. So accept reality and act accordingly.

Source: Bruce Anderson, UNL Forage Specialist



Seedling Alfalfa Management During Drought

Alfalfa seedlings experiencing drought during their first summer may struggle to survive. They're tough. Despite their slow rate of growth and tender appearance, many of them manage to survive stressful conditions and become productive hay-makers.

But some years are harder on these seedlings than others, and this is one of those years. Because of the extended heat and dry weather, alfalfa seedlings are experiencing more stress than usual. Anything you can do to reduce stress and competition will help.

Weeds. Weeds use moisture and intercept light, two critical needs of seedlings. If weeds aren't large and are growing actively, herbicides are a good option. Otherwise, clipping may be necessary. If you must clip, be careful that you don't smother seedlings with your clippings. And leave a tall stubble so seedlings don't go into shock after clipping due to the sudden change in their micro-environment.

Insects. Leafhoppers, aphids, grasshoppers, and other insects cause extra problems during stressful weather. Timely insecticide application or mowing is more important than ever.

Harvest. During drought, I like to give seedlings 70 days or more since planting before harvest. They probably will be in full bloom but they also will have a pretty good root system to gather whatever moisture they can or grow quickly after it rains. They may be short, but at today's hay prices, it doesn't take much to pay harvest costs.

Source: Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist