

Rebuilding the Cowherd: Survival of the Fittest and Alternatives for Forages!

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The U.S. beef cow numbers are at their lowest level in more than 50 years. Beef prices are at historical highs, and yet demand remains strong having continued to increase over the past three years. It sounds like the recipe for sustained profitability in the beef cattle industry for years to come.

That is, until we consider the recent drought and related factors' impact on input costs, and specifically the cost of feed. Yet a couple months ago in this publication - in the midst of the hottest, driest Ohio summer in more than 50 years - I suggested it was time to add cows and build the herd. I still do, especially if one is willing to look at some of the management tools that have not necessarily been considered 'traditional' in the past.

By now, you've already heard or read about all the various alternatives that might be available to either 'increase the feed, or reduce the need' for the limited forage and expensive concentrates we have available this year in Ohio. In fact, aren't the management strategies we've discussed this summer - both in Ohio and across the entire country - simply the same strategies astute cattlemen employ throughout both the good times, and also during those times that challenge even the best managers?

Think about all the management practices that have been discussed this summer in this publication, or in any of the various other publications you might have read. As you analyze it, you realize they are all simply the things that we talk about doing each and every year.

I won't list them all, but let me highlight a few:

Grazing management: leave some residual, and don't let them graze it too close: That's a management practice OSU Extension discusses at every Pasture Management class we host. It needs to happen regardless the weather!

Consider how alternative feeds might replace the traditional forages we'd prefer to feed: That's not a new concept. If an alternative feed such as distiller grains, gluten, wheat midds or even shelled corn is less expensive 'per pound of nutrient' than traditional forages and feed, should it really make a difference whether we're in a drought or not when it comes to working it into the ration?

Grow alternative annual or bi-annual forages on any acres that are available from July on into fall: This is an easy one. We talk about it every year regardless the weather. If you need/want more feed available late in the fall, oats could have been planted into those fields that were available such as wheat stubble or early harvested corn silage fields. If you prefer extra forage next spring, then plant cereal rye or annual ryegrass into those fields yet this fall.

I won't bore you here with all the examples we could discuss, but if you go to the "[Drought 2012](#)" page or our [YouTube channel](#) that you'll find linked at the OSU Extension Beef Team

website (<http://beef.osu.edu>), nearly every alternative imaginable is listed. But, before I close, let me mention one more.

Pen them up and feed them before they - and, you can choose the answer to this one - before they eat the residual forage too close to the roots, while you stockpile fescue, or in some years to avoid trampling wet pastures: How many times have you heard it suggested you might want to pull them into the "drylot" so you could preserve the productivity of pasture, get them off fescue for breeding, or simply most efficiently feed this or that feed stuff? If you've subscribed to the Ohio BEEF Cattle letter since we began the publication in 1996 you've heard it each and every year. During the drought like years of 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, and thus far in 2012, you heard it multiple times. If Ohio cattlemen are thrust into a situation where we must think about pulling cows from pasture and/or drylotting them each and every year, then perhaps it's time to think about preparing a facility where it might become a standard practice at some point during each year.

Over the years there have been a number of reasons that it was suggested a cow might be more efficiently fed and managed at strategic times of the year if moved to a drylot with a feeding pad. The most apparent one this summer was to preserve the life and productivity of a well managed pasture during the drought conditions we experienced again this year. However you likely recall we also discussed it during the record wet weather experienced in 2011.

How many times have we discussed the waste of increasingly valuable hay that remains in the bottom of inefficient bale feeders during the winter? A drylot would afford us the opportunity to process, blend, and efficiently bunk feed low or even high quality forages, supplement cow rations with lower cost alternative energy sources, and reduce the overall hay and pasture acreage required to keep a cow.

Even in a "good summer" we could likely find merit in bringing a cow to drylot at strategic times. If you're 'blessed' with a pasture base of primarily fescue, breeding season might be a prime example of that.

Perhaps the greatest reason to drylot a cow at strategic times is the additional value and productivity of Ohio's farm land that's realized when we grow something like corn versus hay or pasture. As land becomes increasingly valuable for the production of corn and soybeans across Ohio we must ask ourselves, "Can we continue to grow less than 3 tons of hay per acre on land that could just as easily produce 8 tons per acre of dry matter in the form of corn silage?" As you ponder that question, for more on drylotting cows, take a look at the Beef Team Library publication [Drylot Beef Cow/Calf Production](#).

With all this being said, perhaps it's time to consider the overall economics of such a management practice, and the opportunities that drylotting at strategic times offers. After all, I contend that there really isn't such a thing as "drought management" but rather, it's simply "another day in the life." If it's a good way to manage cows in 'extreme' weather, then it's probably a good way to manage cows during 'normal' Ohio weather! In fact, maybe its good enough we could even add more cows profitably.