

Strategies for Drought on Dairy Farms
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Areas of Arkansas are now in a drought. Many dairymen are feeding hay, pastures are depleted, and some areas have a shortage of hay. The situation is compounded by the decrease in spring hay since we had a relatively dry spring. Let us hope that additional rain will be abundant soon, but below are strategies for dealing with the drought (but they are also good sound management strategies). Additionally, many areas of the state have had little rain and producers from other states are buying hay here which has led to a critically short supply of hay.

Strategy 1 Inventory your feeds to determine what is available now and what will be available by the end of fall harvest. Determine what additional feeds are required until a new crop is harvested. Pasture from winter annuals will be little, if any, this year unless rains come soon. For most dairy producers in the state, attempts should be made to locate forage that is for sale if you don't have a sufficient supply. Most will be purchasing feed for the milking parlor or additional grains as needed throughout the year. In some cases, it may be beneficial to look at available options for contracting a portion of your feeds. It is always difficult to contract feeds when feed prices are high, but it may assist in planning feed needs for the next six months. Try to contract when feed prices are at a low point.

Strategy 2 Look for alternative feeds. **Be especially careful to make sure you have enough fiber in the ration. Cows eat to meet their energy needs and will eat a lot of grain in the parlor if allowed to do so when forages are limited. Forage intake then can be reduced to the point that the cows have metabolic problems, such as off-feed, acidosis, twisted stomachs (displaced abomasums), and even deaths, depending on the duration and severity of the problem.**

Some producers may have access to alternative feeds such as soy hulls, hominy, forage products, corn gluten feed, and wheat midds as well as the most common commodity feeds - cottonseed and cottonseed hulls. Consult with your feed company representative or your county Extension agent to compare the relative value of these feeds by using various computer programs to determine whether they are a good buy relative to corn and soybean meal. Like corn and soybean meal, these feeds will vary in price. If the opportunity arises to contract a feed for a good price, it should be looked at very carefully. Cottonseed has been a relatively good buy because it's high in both energy and protein, but has been limited in availability. For producers with mixed feeds in the barn, cottonseed hulls and soy hulls are usually the easiest to add to the concentrate to add fiber to the diet. Cottonseed hulls have been very expensive recently but are the easiest to add to the mix and require less quantity to get higher fiber in the concentrate mix than soy hulls. If you feed a total mixed ration (TMR) or partial TMR, consider using soy hulls or ground hay of lesser quality to balance for fiber. **Regardless of feeding a TMR or in the barn, make sure fiber is adequate in the ration.**

Strategy 3 Make sure your ration is balanced for your level of production, especially the fiber content. **Feed the best forage to the milking cows.** Do not cut back on your feed in the milking parlor or grain in the TMR to the point that you end up with thin cows. Balance the ration by using a ration balancing program. These are available through your local county Extension office or local feed dealer.

The PCDart ration balancing program from your county Extension agent will balance the diet to maximize income-over-feed cost. The ration does not provide a least cost estimate of balancing the diet but merely one that tends to maximize income-over-feed cost when cows are fed properly. The county agent will need to know present production per cow, goal for production per cow, the cows' body weight, the days in milk for the cows, fat percentage of the milk, plus the feed ingredients and their costs. Balancing the ration is a place to start in terms of maximizing income-over-feed cost.

Balancing the ration does not ensure that you will obtain that level of production. To increase the level of production, you should balance the ration for a slightly greater level of milk production. However, over feeding your cows will result in not only poor utilization of the feed by the animals but also digestive upsets and fat cows in some cases. Under feeding your cows will result in poor conception rates and other health problems. Generally, when people cut back on the barn feed for their cows, they do not provide an increase in forage. It is critical that all components of the diet, including crude protein, energy, fiber, and non-fiber carbohydrates be balanced. Be especially careful not to cut back grain to cows in early lactation since this may decrease their production level for the remainder of the lactation.

Strategy 4 Feed cows according to their level of production. High-producing cows require more energy and a greater concentration of energy in the diet in order to consume enough nutrients to produce large quantities of milk. To the contrary, low producers require much lower levels of grain to produce perhaps 35 pounds of milk. If additional grain is fed, then they will usually reduce their intake of forages. If you feed your cows in groups according to levels of production, fine tune their rations so that higher-producing cows are receiving a balanced ration with more grain than lower- producing cows.

Strategy 5 If you are in a situation where pasture is available to you, use it to the maximum. If it has rained recently, be sure to allow the grass to grow to appropriate length before cows start grazing. Plants need the green surface area for photosynthesis to take place so they can produce more growth.

Strategy 6 Review your operation to make sure that cow comfort is not limiting milk production. Fresh water and feed should be available to cows at all times.

Strategy 7 Visit with successful neighbors and discuss some of the strategies they are using. Don't be afraid to ask others for assistance in your decision making. However, be sure to ask for assistance before your financial situation deteriorates to a critical point.

The most important item in dealing with the drought is to make sure there is enough fiber in the diet.

Put a pencil to the changes to determine how these changes are going to increase or decrease your income. Don't change a lot of things at one time. Usually, it is difficult to determine how changing one management practice affects your bottom line. If you change several feeding practices as well some management techniques at the same time, it is almost impossible to determine which ones are benefiting you. If something appears to be working, don't change it. If something does not look right on paper, the odds are that it will not work in practice.

If you need assistance on specifics, contact your local county Extension agent and he/she will be glad to assist you or work with other individuals within the industry who can assist you.