TEXAS A&M AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE

September 2023

Comanche County Agriculture Newsletter

These have been two of the toughest years most farmers can remember, and conditions in the county and area continue to deteriorate. Irrigated crops are losing water availability and crashing- no dryland crops or fields are productive. All cattle now on full feed and hay, no grazing available- despite a fair first cutting, there is not enough hay to last very long. We can expect more cattle to go to the market and the continued depletion of the counties already very low cow herd. Dairymen are facing low forage supplies, extremely high input cost and extremely low milk prices, well below breakeven. Despite the county's agriculture diversity, no commodity shows any sign of being profitable or sustainable until we get some considerable rainfall. If it starts raining tomorrow, it will take several years for us to recover, and many may never recover.

Well, that is a lot of bad news to digest and there are not a lot of positives, but here is at least a little good news and some opportunities for farmers and ranchers. There are a couple of good programs available through the Farm Service Agency that can at least help offset some costs. The first is the Livestock and Forage Program that pays based on drought stage, number of head, and/or acres. If you have not done so, I encourage you to go sign-up for this program. Another FSA program is the Feed Transportation Program. This program will help cover the cost of hauling or having hay hauled into your farm. It might make some of the hay in east and northeast Texas or elsewhere more affordable. I am not an expert on these programs so please give the good folks at the Comanche County Farm Service Agency a call and they can explain the program and help you sign up.

So, what is the good news? We are out of the La Nina weather system and are moving into the El Nino pattern which should eventually bring us better moisture. According to the National Weather Service, we are now under equal chances of wet or dry, certainly we are leaning toward dry. However, by November we will be under the 30% to 40% chance of wetter than normal forecast. Not that the winter is the best time to be wetter, but at this point wetter at any time will be nice. If you are a livestock producer, markets have already hit some historical highs and due to very low numbers these good prices should stick around for a while, if we can all just keep some animals to take advantage of the good prices.

Some Options to Help Feed Beef Herd During Difficult Times

Here are a few management options that most are aware of, but here is a refresher: For those spring calving herds it is certainly not too early to consider weaning. This option will reduce grass and feed requirements quickly. You could either choose to go ahead and sell those calves or wean and feed them separately. It is typically more cost effective to feed early weaned calves through a drought than lactating cows. In addition, the maintenance requirements of a dry cow are about half that of a lactating cow. As mentioned, dry cows have very low nutritional requirements compared to lactating cows and require 30% less feed than a lactating cow. You can maintain your dry cows on pretty poor -quality forage without the need to supplement. If you feel your calves are just too small and young to wean then consider creep feeding them. About the only time I think creep feeding is economically feasible is during a drought situation. Creep feeding can take considerable pressure off your cows and lower their nutritional requirements.

If you still have some grass left (which is unlikely) and you have already culled and early-weaned, supplementing your herd can help you to extend grazing on the grass you have without having to rely totally on a feed bucket. Finally, if it gets to the point where your pastures are gone and you have culled as much as you can stand, you will have to step up your supplemental feeding. You will have two options, purchase hay or a hay replacement option. Limit-fed grain-based rations can be very economical. However, you will need some hay and unlike last year there is at least some hay available in certain areas of Texas. Portions of east and northeast Texas have received good rainfall and there should be some hay available in those locations.

Ideas for Stretching Hay Supplies

I have used some of this information in previous articles on years when hay supplies were short, and we are right back to short hay supplies and no pasture, maybe some of the worse conditions in memory.

David Lalman, OSU Extension cattle specialist has some helpful tips to help conserve your hay supplies. According to Lalman winter hay needs can be reduced by almost a third by using two of these three strategies: feed an ionophore, limit-feed hay, and reduce hay waste.

Feed an ionophore. In an OSU study, cows receiving common prairie hay and 2 lbs./day of supplement (30% crude protein) with 200 mg/day of Rumensin – the only ionophore labeled for use in breeding cows – gained 30 lbs., or about a half of one body condition score (BCS), over 58 days. The cost of feeding the ionophore was 2¢/day. In previous research, Rumensin in cow rations reduced feed intake by about 10% without affecting performance. But be careful as Rumensin is very toxic to horses- killing the wife's horse may not be worth the reduced feed intake.

Limit feed hay. Cows need to be in a minimum BCS of 4-5 to limit feed hay. This limit-feeding strategy, which is often used in growing cattle, improves feed efficiency, increases digestibility, and decreases waste. Based on previous research, giving cows access to hay for six hours/day – fencing off hay feeders as an example – rather than unlimited access, reduces intake by 20%.

If access cannot be restricted, Lalman suggests estimating the amount of hay cows require daily and then reducing it by 20%. Across 85-90 days, Lalman says research indicates that cows limit-fed hay will lose 20-40 lbs., or about half of one BCS. If it is a viable option, Lalman emphasizes that utilizing the strategy can reduce hay needs by 20%.

Reduce hay waste. Any type of hay feeder is more efficient than using none, but the specific type of feeder used makes a huge difference in waste. For instance, an open-bottom bale ring – no sheeting around the bottom – means about 21% of the hay put into it is wasted, according to OSU research. "Losing 21% of prairie hay that costs more than $150/ton gets expensive" - compare that to a modified-cone feeder. Waste associated with this design is about 5%. Just adding sheeting to the bottom of an open-bottom bale ring reduces waste from 21% to about 13%. If you do not have any round bale feeders consider unrolling hay (when conditions are not too wet or muddy), but only put out what they can consume in one feeding. If you put out any extra the cattle will bed in it, and you are going to have lots of waste.

Lalman says that by using just two of these three strategies, you can save 30% of your hay cost.

Some other factors to consider are how much do your cattle weigh and how much do your rolls of hay weigh? Round bale weights that I see typically vary from 750 to 1300 lbs., with the majority falling in the 850 to 1000 lb. range. Judging cattle weights can also be hard, most of the cattle in the county are nice moderate sized cattle that will weigh in the 1200 lb. range, some larger framed cattle will be heavier and some smaller framed or longhorn types will be lighter. It is important to have an idea of both these items as all rations must start with an idea of cow weight. A general rule of thumb is a cow will need 3% of their body weight in hay. Using that rule, a 1,000-pound bale and a 1,200-pound cow, with easy math each cow needs 36 pounds of hay a day. That lets one 1000 lb. roll feed 27 cows with a little to spare. You do not have to know the weight of each individual cow, but perhaps you have weights of some cull cattle you have sold in the past, this might give you a starting point for cattle weight. It is not that hard to weigh a trailer load of round bales at one of the many scales in the county, then average that out.

Certainly, not all hay is created equal and different classes of cattle will require different qualities of hay. A mid-gestation cow can get by with 7% crude protein (CP) and 55% total digestible nutrients (TDN), this is just a fair to good quality hay. A cow with a calf at her side will need 11% CP and at 65% TDN, this would be a good to very good quality hay. When possible, grouping your cattle by nutritional need will make feeding much simpler, reduce waste, and lower the potential for poor cattle.

If you use some of these simple figures and count the hay in your stack and can tell you are going to be short, you will need to consider supplementing part of your herds nutritional requirements with some type of feed product. In visiting with producers across the county, I estimate we lost 50% of our cow herd in 2022 and will lose more this year. If you can hold on to what you have left, replacement cattle and calf prices should continue to be strong and maybe even gain some in the future.

Drought Devastating to Local Pecan Industry

Two years of drought may be more than many orchards and producers can take. All of agriculture in the county and Central Texas has been hammered by these ongoing conditions, but for those depending on trees for a living, it is extra hard. Drought has devastated the Central Texas pecan industry. In both 2022 and 2023, we have seen extreme and exceptional drought conditions in Central Texas and Comanche County pecan orchards- exceptional being the highest drought designation. Both years have also seen long spells of very high temperatures, but in 2023 we have exceeded 110 degrees multiple days and since July we have seen very few if any days under 100 degrees. Due to the drought and high evaporation conditions, keeping pecan orchards watered through irrigation has been a struggle and water restrictions have hit growers especially hard. Those that have wells for irrigation are being forced to cut back to ½ or less normal usage due to lower groundwater levels.

In Comanche County we saw income from pecans sales drop from $24,172,000.00 in 2021 to $11,348,700.00 in 2022, due to lost production because of drought. If National Weather Service predictions hold true for the next 3 months, we will receive little to no rainfall and with irrigation being cut way back on orchards we can expect production to drop to at least half of last year's already poor levels. Seeing the current level of nut drop and knowing the weather outlook, at this point I will be surprised if we reach 5 million in sales this year.

We started seeing tree death last year and can expect increased death in both dryland and irrigated orchards for the next several years. My best estimation using the 2011-12 drought as a reference, is that we will lose 15% to 25% of the pecan trees in the county. If these conditions continue, this number will grow. Unfortunately, unlike an annual crop, we will see the effects of this drought for years to come. After planting a new tree, it takes 15 years to get decent production from a pecan tree. Before you can even plant those new trees, you have to remove the dead ones. With the potential for orchards to lose many acres of trees, clean-up will be slow and costly.

This large loss of current and future income is not only devastating for growers, but also the local economy. The pecan industry has a long history of providing jobs and pumping money into the local economy; for an agriculture-based county like Comanche, these losses will be hard if not impossible to make up. So, don't complain about high pecan prices and enjoy those local pecans, a lot of work and worry has gone into producing them.

Ryegrass

Once it starts raining another good option is ryegrass- it can be planted with minimum soil preparation. As bare as most pastures are now, you could probably get by just broadcasting over the sod, but drilling into the sod is best. You do not have to be perfect, just good seed to soil contact and of course some rainfall to soak it in will get you a good stand. Annual ryegrass can add several months of grazing for your operation. In a mild winter like the one predicted this year, you can expect to get fall and winter grazing from ryegrass. However, most years your grazing will be from late February or early March through the first of June. Ryegrass has very few disease issues. Just like small grains, it will need to be fertilized if you want good production. The only bad things you can really say about ryegrass are, if not properly managed when over seeded it can compete with your bermudagrass next spring, especially on dryland fields. However, if you want to consider a cheaper crop to plant, that has the potential to produce lots of high-quality forage, it is hard to beat.

Small Grain Management

I know despite the current conditions you are an eternal optimist at heart and are planning to make up for this summer's forage losses by planting grain this fall. There is no better way to put pounds on calves than by grazing grain, but planting small grains is not cheap and there are certainly no guarantees of success. Fertilizer prices are down somewhat, but still high, and every other aspect of planting grain is expensive these days. I would encourage you to really pencil out how much you should plant versus saving a portion of that planting money for feed and hay. While feed and hay are high, the risk is almost nil- you get what you pay for without worrying about weather.

If it looks like we are going to start getting some good moisture and you decide to plant some winter pasture, there are many factors to consider when making small grain planting decisions. Seed will probably be very high this year and most of us are already very stressed economically right now and maybe looking for some ways to save. Bin run seed will save you some money on seed cost, just know your source. Quality seed will result in better germination and performance especially when under stress. Seeding rate is always an interesting topic for discussion. I usually lean toward higher seeding rates for grazing. In a study we did in the county a few years back, the most efficient seeding rate for wheat for grazing was 110 lbs. However, with the underlying threat of dry conditions this winter, I am going to suggest seeding rates in the 65 to 75 lb./acre range for dryland acres. That is for seed planted with a drill, for broadcasting I would still recommend 100 lbs. or more.

If we start getting rainfall, planting early is always best if you hope to get early grazing, mid-September is usually optimal planting time for grazing and higher forage total for the whole season. Right now, looking at the forecast and the grasshopper population, I do not necessarily recommend planting in September. I would not spend all that money until we had some moisture in the ground and maybe some more on the way.

Nutrient management is always a priority for any forage production. I sometimes get the feeling folks think they can get good grazing on small grains without the fertilizer inputs- this is not the case. Regardless of the season, a good fertility management program is critical for production. To make grazing small grains profitable, you must fertilize for maximum production. Utilizing a soil test is the only truly efficient way to know what you should apply to reach a desired production goal. However, without a soil test we do have some rule of thumbs that will get you pretty close. A split application on nitrogen (N) is recommended. The first application of 40 to 60 lbs. of nitrogen and 30 lbs. of phosphorus would be applied at planting. If possible, incorporate this application into the soil. This will increase root growth, tillering, and early growth, but also it will help to protect the initial nitrogen application from volatilizing out of the soil. The second application would be made based on grazing pressure and growth. If it is dry, you may not want to make another application, if we get moisture and you're grazing lots of cattle you will increase the amount of N. Typically, it takes 30 lbs. of N for every 1000lb of forage produced. Another way for grazers to figure N requirements is that for every 100lbs of gain 30 to 40 lbs. of N have been removed. If you plan on 400 lbs. gain per acre you know you will need 120 to 160 lbs. total N per acre. The most efficient method would be to apply your additional N after each graze off, but the initial fall application and an additional early spring application may suffice.

I truly hope we start getting some fall moisture and everyone can grow some good small grains this winter- it would make a huge difference for everyone.

***Upcoming Programs:**

Peanut Field Day

This program will take place on Friday, October 6th at 10:00 AM at Todd Denman's Farm in Lamkin. We will start in the field with registration at 9:30 AM and finish with lunch at the Gustine City Café. We will look at peanut variety breeding, state, and Diesel Nut trials and talk with specialists about production, disease and insect pressure, fungicide, and nematode resistant varieties and new technology. We will offer 2 CEU's, 1 IPM and 1 general. There is no charge and lunch will be provided by our great local sponsors.

Tri County Cattle Gathering

This program will tentatively take place on Friday October 13th from 12:00 PM until approximately 4:00 PM at MP Brangus near Carleton. Topics will be based on the drought conditions as we get closer to the date. We do know we will have discussion about dormant season brush control, and maybe drought economics, winter pasture seeding, or other topics as dictated by the conditions at that time. Please watch for future updates. We plan to offer 1 CEU and the program cost will be covered by our great local sponsors.

Texas 4-H Welcomes the 2023-2024 Year

The 2023-2024 4-H year officially kicked off September 1st. Texas 4-H of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, is excited to welcome new and returning members to another year of 4-H programming and opportunity.

4-H is a club for youth ages 8 to 18 in grades 3rd through 12th. All youth can join 4-H for $25 each and can select one or many projects to participate in from the categories of agriculture and livestock, family and community health, leadership and citizenship, natural resources, and STEM. Community service, leadership, and scholarship opportunities are also included in the offerings of this program that reaches more than 550,000 youth in Texas each year.

“The start of the new 4-H year is such an exciting time in our program,” Texas 4-H Youth Development Program director Dr. Montza Williams said. “We hope to see members take advantage of every opportunity that 4-H has to offer this year, and we hope to see new members begin their journey in this life-changing program.”

**Interested in joining 4-H? Call the office for more information or visit https://texas4-h.tamu.edu/ to learn more!!

Want to stay in touch?

Stay up to date on everything Extension on our website and Facebook pages:

County Website: https://comanche.agrilife.org/

Facebook Pages:

*Comanche County Agriculture

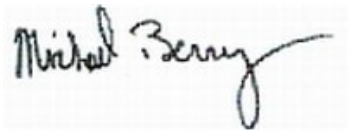
*Comanche County Texas A&M AgriLife Extension

Our office is open Monday to Friday 8:30 AM– 5:00 PM.

You are always welcome to call or email if you prefer.

Please call the office at 325-356-2539.

Emails:



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Individuals with disabilities who plan to attend meetings and who may need auxiliary aids, services, or accommodations must contact the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, Comanche, at 325-356-2539 five days prior to the event so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The members of Texas A&M AgriLife will provide equal opportunities in programs and activities, education, and employment to all persons regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender identity and will strive to achieve full and equal employment opportunity throughout Texas A&M AgriLife.

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