

Ark. Drought Continues To Worsen, Some Cattle Producers Hauling Water

HARRISON, ARK.

Worsening drought is prompting some Arkansas cattle producers to do more than just haul hay to feed their herds: Now they're hauling in water.

"That started about the end of August on the places with the smallest ponds," said Mike McClintock, Boone County extension agent for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. "We need RAIN. A half-inch to an inch-and-a-half won't cut it."

Producers aren't hiring tanker trucks and not every producer is having to haul water. However, those who do are moving water are using fiberglass or plastic tanks that fit in the back of a pickup truck, McClintock said.

WORST YEAR FOR HAY

"This is probably the worst year for low hay supplies I have ever seen," said John Jennings, professor-forage, for the U of A Division of Agriculture. "Practically every patch of standing weeds or forage was cut and baled, with much of it going out of state to the west.

Jennings said the hay supply in surrounding states is diminished due to high shipping volume to Texas and Oklahoma. Only a handful of producers in Arkansas have good hay supplies and the NE corner is the only region that received enough rain for good hay and pasture growth.

"Hauling feed is possible, but hauling water long term means more livestock will be liquidated unless 'runoff'-type rainfall occurs soon," he said.

DUMPING LIVESTOCK

Southern Arkansas has been subject to a lengthy drought. Parts of Miller, Union and Columbia counties are classified as being in the worst two drought categories, extreme and exceptional.

The National Weather Service said Texarkana reported 52 days with highs of 100 degrees or higher – a day short of the record. The city also saw 17 straight days hitting the century mark.

As of Oct. 31, Texarkana recorded 22.12 inches of rain, which is 17.66 inches below normal and the projected weather patterns for spring are calling for drier and warmer conditions.

"We have also had numerous reports of feral horses and donkeys in Texarkana and in the country, due to people dumping them when they couldn't feed them," said Doug Petty, Miller County extension staff chair for the U of A Division of Agriculture.

In nearby Little River County, where drought is rated severe to extreme, "we have producers feeding anything they can get – rice stubble,

corn stalks, poultry litter, etc. – and many will run out of hay in January or February," said Joe Paul Stuart, Little River County extension staff chair. "A lot of cattle are thin going into winter and their nutrition is such that they are going to get even thinner. I expect to see some real wrecks next spring."

Jerri Lephiew, agricultural extension agent in Ouachita County, said: "Most producers I have spoken with say they do not have enough hay to carry the stock they have through the winter."

While others are selling off cattle to reduce the number of mouths to feed, some of the producers in her county "are trying to hold on to what they have because the general consensus is that beef is going to go too high for many to buy back in later," she said

BALANCING MOUTHS AND FORAGE

Cattle producers in that other hotspot, the Arkansas River Valley, are walking a tightrope, trying to refine the balance between hungry herds and hay to a razor's sharpness.

"Most farmers think they may have enough hay but it is going to be extremely tight – not a lot of wiggle room," said Faulkner County Extension Staff Chair Hank Chaney. "We were fortunate to have gotten much needed rainfall in August which improved the situation dramatically but we are still off at least one cutting and any surplus hay has either been sold or in reserve."

In Logan County, Lance Kirkpatrick, extension agent for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture said his county has endured plenty of dry days and producers are stretching.

"We did get some rain in August that helped some producers a lot in terms of quantity," he said, adding "the hay situation is pretty tight for most producers in Logan County. Producers may have just enough hay to weather a mild winter but the bigger issue is hay quality and if we have a winter like last year it will be tough."

Kirkpatrick, Lephiew and Chaney all said that winter will be only half the challenge for cattle producers.

"Even the beef herds that make it through the winter, they will still have some tough days ahead of them," Kirkpatrick said. "The biggest concern to me is not if producers can make it through the winter it is the impact that last years drought will have on beef herds this spring."

Lephiew said keeping the cattle well fed is critical to breeding in the spring.

"The results of this are going to come around in the spring ... if they don't get their mix in the proper proportions their cows will not breed back well," she said. Δ



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