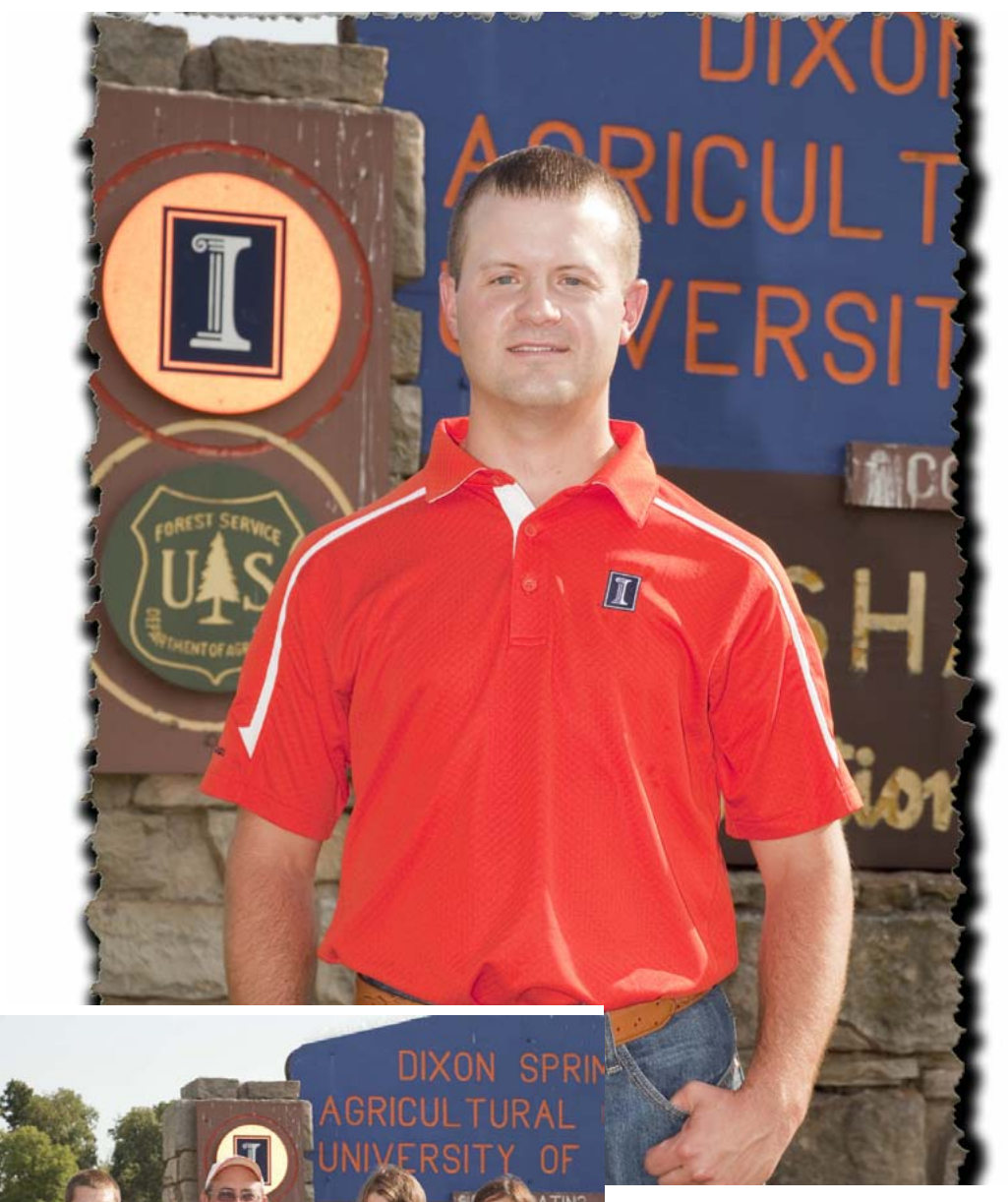
Cattle Management



Dr. Dan Shike, assistant professor in the Department of Animal Science at the University of Illinois, has some tips for farmers on managing the cattle herd and salvaging drought stricken crops.
Inset Photo Right is Frank A. Ireland, Research Animal Scientist with three interns at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center. From left to right is Tim Delvalle, Frank Ireland, Madeline Milnamow and Eileen Sul.
Photos by John LaRose, Jr.

Weaning, Culling Cattle, Using Drought Stricken Crops Can Bring Herd Through Summer Heat

BETTY VALLE GEGG-NAEGER
MidAmerica Farmer Grower

DIXON SPRINGS, ILL.

Managing the cattle herd and salvaging drought stricken crops is a big concern this summer, and Dr. Dan Shike, assistant professor in the Department of Animal Science at the University of Illinois, has some tips for farmers.

"Obviously it's no surprise to any of the producers in the Midwest, and particularly here in southern Illinois, that we are experiencing extreme drought conditions," he said. "Producers want to know what their options are. One of the key things that I'm going to hit on is first you have to assess your own situation. What is your particular situation?"

While it has been a dry summer, there are pockets where more rain has fallen. Also, everyone has a different amount of pasture. Maybe some have started the year with hardly enough pasture even for a good year. Everyone's situation is different. So everyone has to assess the status of his own cow herd. Did you enter this year with cows that were already in poor condition? Are you a spring calving herd or a fall calving herd? Those differences will greatly impact the requirements of your cows.

"If you're a spring calving herd and you still have calves at the side of the cow, one of your best management tools is to wean those calves early," Shike said. "That will immediately reduce the requirements for the cow. You can have more grazing capacity then, and at least there will be more available forage out there for those cows.

"Right now those calves are probably eating 8 to 10 pounds of dry matter of forage themselves, not to mention still nursing and increasing the requirement on the cow, so that would immediately alleviate that stress on the cow and they will improve body condition and weight; and if you're still in the breeding season it will likely improve your conception rates."

In any spring calving herds, farmers may already have pulled bulls and have already missed that conception window, but if there still are calves at side, particularly if bulls are still out there, pulling those calves is highly recommended.

"Another thing that you have to consider, and this is not really something that the beef industry needs, but you have to consider a little more aggressive culling," he suggested. "Our cow numbers are already extremely low, so from an overall supply standpoint, that may not be a great thing, but each individual producer is going to have to assess these issues. If you don't have enough forage, you don't have enough stored feed put away, with feed costs as high as they are, you still may want to consider a little more aggressive culling."

He suggests starting with pregnancy checking. The first cow that goes is the one that is not pregnant. That cow is not going to make any money this year. Farmers need to throw away the notion of their favorite cow and they have to cull the cows that are open first, and then progress to older problem cows. The last animal to cull would be a poor producing young cow. Already there is a lot invested in that young cow so even if she is not the great producer, if she's still pregnant and young, her cost to replace later on will be pretty high so culling her would be the last resort.

There are several options for feed for the herd. Since pastures are almost nonexistent, many have already started feeding the feed that was really intended to be for winter. So there's going to be a real shortage. Hay production was already going to be low because of loss of acres of hay and then compound that with the extreme drought, so hay production has been very, very minimal. Just being able to find that hay is going to be difficult; and if you do it's going to be very expensive.

"One of the things we're getting lots of questions about, obviously, is what to do with this drought corn," Shike said. "There's a lot of corn that is severely damaged with very little, and in many cases, no grain; that corn still does have feed value. There are lots of considerations, the biggest one on whether a farmer can use this drought stressed corn is the nitrate level. So I highly require that you test for nitrates, and there are several places that you can get that test done. Nitrate levels need to be below 4,400 ppm to be considered safe. Even if it has higher nitrate, you can still possibly use it if you dilute it and mix it with some other feed stuffs. So you want to get that corn crop tested before you consider what you're going to do with it."

Farmers then need to consider how to harvest it and how to feed it. It can be green chopped, it can be baled and it can be grazed. Those options are not the first choice, because none of them reduce any of the nitrates. Whatever nitrate level is there doesn't matter if you green chop it. If you bale it or dry it down or graze it, that nitrate is what they are going to consume. If it is at a toxic level, that's not really a good choice.

"The only time grazing should be considered is if it's so short out there and it's just hardly worth running equipment over it," he said. "But again, only if you have proven that the nitrate levels aren't toxic. Your best option is going to be ensiling it because by ensiling it, depending on how good fermentation you get, you will reduce the nitrates by 25 percent to 50 percent. So that's a tool you have to deal with some of this corn that's too high in nitrates."

When ensiling it, the dry matter must be in an appropriate range. It should be 35 percent to 40 percent dry matter to assure there's a proper fermentation to make good silage. The feed value of that silage is actually still pretty good. When the corn plant doesn't make grain it still retains the sugars in the plant; and there's still pretty good feed value on some of this corn that is near zero yield.

"We'll often see a feeding value of 75 percent to 80 percent or higher, and even with terrible yields of 40 or 50 bushel, that corn silage may have almost equal feed value," Shike said. "The biggest loss that we're going to have will be tonnage. Clearly we're going to have much less dry matter, much less tonnage out there on a real poor yielding short plant than we would on a tall plant with a lot of grain. So the biggest loss is in dry matter, not so much in quality. As long as it tests out on nitrates, ensiling it can make an excellent feed source, so that needs to be a consideration."

"As far as other crops there has been some questions about soybeans," he added. "The soybean crop still has some hope but we are approaching some areas here where soybean crop is at a pretty serious state as well. That can be baled also. But there are things to consider there just like with corn; you need to talk to your insurance agent, make sure before you do anything you're good on any claims. The other thing with soybeans is we need to make sure we know what they've been sprayed with as far as herbicides and pesticides. There are some that make it unsuitable for forage for animals so you need to make sure to check the records on that and check the labels before you do anything there, but if that checks out then we can use the soybeans."

If you're going to bale it, it needs to be run through a crimper. It can be pretty tough to dry down, but once it's dried down, then it will make hay. It's a pretty good protein source since it is a legume, but the energy will be fairly low. It will have much lower energy content than corn silage, but it will be a much higher protein source. So those drought stricken soybeans can be salvaged as well.

Other things that need to be considered are the equipment, not just for harvesting it as there are plenty of guys that will custom harvest that and put it in a pile for you or bag it in whatever way you going to feed it. Do you have the necessary equipment to do that?

"Also to be considered are the other low cost forage options," he added. "We've really been promoting the use of crop residue throughout the Midwest, particularly here in Illinois and Iowa. There has been a lot of work done on using some of the corn stalk residue bales and that can be a real good option for the corn as well. If the producer deems there is enough yield out there to harvest the grain he can still bale up some of that residue. Again, there are the same concerns with nitrates and again it should be tested first. But corn stalk residue, or wheat straw, CRP hay or any low quality forage can be utilized."

The other thing Shike would recommend as a supplement for that would be some of the corn co-products. While they have also gone up in price dramatically, they still are a viable option as an energy source because everything has gone up in price. They are very expensive and some producers surely are experiencing sticker shock; but you still have to compare on a cost per unit of energy basis, and those co-products are an excellent source of protein and phosphorus, so they make a nice complement to low quality forage for the cow herd.

"The most important thing, again, is just that producers need to assess their own situation to see where they are with their cattle, see where they are with forages and stored feeds," Shike summed. "Make a plan. Some guys were probably starting to think about winter feeding plans and now we need to have a drought plan, so we have to get the drought plan taken care of and then we need to keep thinking about the winter feeding plan."

Again, he stressed testing the drought corn for nitrates before using it for corn silage.

"Once you know where you are, then you can determine how you're going to feed it," he said. "And, you're just going to have to make some hard decisions and take advantage of any of the cattle management strategies that may fit your herd. Try to put together the cost options for getting through the drought and getting through the winter and, sooner or later, hopefully it will rain and we'll get back on track. But everybody is going to have to make some really hard decisions and buckel down to get through this." Δ

BETTY VALLE GEGG-NAEGER: Senior Staff Writer, MidAmerica Farmer Grower