

Overcoming Forage Shortages In A Drought

COLUMBIA, MO.

During the drought of 2012, producers with disappearing forage were seeking options to feed livestock.

There are three basic ways to overcome forage shortfalls in a drought, says University of Missouri Extension agricultural economist Joe Horner. Those ways are insurance, inventory or irrigation.

“Usually, the cheapest way to get through a drought is to inventory your way out,” Horner said.

But hay was extremely expensive last year. Two years of drought in Oklahoma and Texas had depleted hay supplies, and with the boom in corn and soybean prices, alfalfa production in Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota dropped by more than half during the past five years as farmers moved acreage into cash crops.

“Quality forage is not cheap,” Horner said. “It’s not going to get cheap anytime soon.”

The insurance option, of course, requires you to make that decision the fall before the drought. So a lot of producers started looking at small-scale irrigation systems.

“What makes irrigation attractive is that you can irrigate your way out of a drought without

thinking ahead,” Horner said.

But it’s not for everyone, he cautioned. “If you are lucky enough to be near a good volume of flowing water, there are some ways to get some pretty low-cost irrigation out of that. If you have to drill a well and pump water from a long distance, it is pretty hard to make the economics work.”

If you don’t have access to a creek, river or good-sized lake, Horner says it will probably be cheaper for you to buy forage. But some dairy producers may still want to explore irrigation.

“Feeding stored forage changes the feed quality,” he said. “It changes the labor workload. It changes the nutrient management system. So I think there are a lot of producers out there who are interested in putting in these small-scale systems if there is still a margin left, even if it isn’t necessarily the cheapest way of doing it.”

MU Extension has developed a downloadable calculator to help producers estimate the costs of putting in a small irrigation system. The calculator provides cost per dry ton and cost per pound of dry matter on a grazed basis. The tool can be found at <http://dairy.missouri.edu/grazing/resources/>.

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