

Ranchers Faced With Chronic Or Periodic Drought Need To Plan For The Long Term

Fertility, moisture management over long term important with chronic drought.

FAYETTEVILLE, ARK.

Drought has been a frequent companion to Arkansas livestock producers over the last few years, and survival will mean learning to plan for the long term in addition to taking action season to season, said Dirk Philipp, assistant professor for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Drought grew to cover more than 90 percent of the state in the July 23 U.S. Drought Monitor map. However, recent rain has helped reduce that area to around 71 percent in Thursday's map.

"Arkansas producers know too well that it would only take a few rainless weeks to induce drought conditions again, so long-term management is a must," Philipp said.

Creating a farm forage plan should include forages that can be used to close gaps in growth during the year.

"During winter, annual clovers such as crimson clover and hairy vetch are easy to establish and can be grazed in early spring," he said. "Arrowleaf clover is relatively drought-tolerant and grows somewhat longer than crimson clover or hairy vetch."

These forages are helpful in more than one way, Philipp said. "They add root biomass to the ground and can help save nitrogen applications,

and they can help in suppressing weeds and improving ground cover."

Planting annual ryegrass or cereal rye showed good results in southern Arkansas: grazing can usually begin early in the year and carried through until May. "Annual ryegrass grows rapidly, so this is also a chance to stock up on hay if needed," he said.

Summer annual forages such as pearl millet and sorghum-sudan can be used to supplement perennial grasses when those cannot be grazed at all or at a reduced stocking rate. There's one caveat, however, "Take extra care with nitrate and prussic acid levels in these summer annual forages," Philipp said.

Fertility matters in the long run

Maintaining soil fertility and soil moisture will become much more important in the future if droughty years occur more often. Soil fertility should be monitored often and fertilizer applied according to recommendations.

Nitrogen needs to be applied when growth occurs, but phosphorous and potassium can be applied in advance, he said. "Do everything to minimize runoff and thus keeping precipitation/moisture on your place; leave generous buffer zones around streams so these areas can be grazed in summer if needed." Δ