

Bluestem Breezes
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May 21, 2014

Monitoring Grass Quality Still a Need

We have long been told that “If you take care of the grass, the grass will take care of you.” There is indeed some truth to that. In order to maintain that philosophy, we need to consistently monitor the condition of our rangelands.

As of Wednesday, May 21, when I am writing this column, we are still kicking up dust driving through pastures in several areas of the county. I venture to say that while we are all sitting in better shape now than last May, we aren’t out of the woods yet. The forecast over the next week is showing the potential for meaningful rains, so I’m hoping this column will entice those late spring rains.

Nonetheless, I encourage you to continue monitoring your pastures closely throughout this grazing season! After 2+ years of varying levels of drought, most of these pastures cannot afford another combination of low moisture and moderate to heavy grazing this year.

Drs. Chris Reinhardt and K.C. Olson, both beef specialists at K-State, wrote a recent “Feedlot Facts” that offers guidance on assessing moisture levels to aid in determining changes to your grazing program. Please, read on:

“Spring is here---finally. However, many ranchers in the western regions have not received adequate winter and spring precipitation to sustain normal grazing pressure throughout the coming summer grazing season.

In addition to their substantial financial investment, ranchers have an emotional investment in their range lands as well. This is to be expected; their range resource is the source of their livelihood, the primary source of nutrients for their cow herd, and is likely to have been in their family’s possession for generations. Unfortunately, like anything else to which we become emotionally attached, this emotional attachment handicaps us from making completely objective decisions regarding the disposition of this precious asset.

An effective drought management plan is made up of a combination of *objective measures* of precipitation and forage growth with *critical trigger dates* when decisive action must be made with respect to grazing pressure in the interest of long-term preservation of range productivity. The objective measures help overcome some of the emotional attachment, and the critical trigger dates have been previously set based on knowledge of the stages of plant growth and the plants’ need for regeneration.

The critical dates will vary based on your geography, but one example of a simple set of sequential, “if then” guidelines for ranchers in northeast Kansas may be as follows:

1) **April 1:** IF < 15% of average annual moisture (measured from November 1 through April 1) has been received, THEN prescribed burns are cancelled.

2) **June 30:** IF < 80% of average annual moisture has been received, THEN decrease stocking rate by 30%. Removing calves from cows and the range will reduce grazing pressure by approximately 30%.

IF < 60% of average annual moisture has been received, THEN decrease stocking rate by 40% (both early weaning and additional light culling of the cow herd).

3) **September 1:** IF < 70% of average July-August moisture has been received, THEN remove all cattle from the pastures. Adequate leaf area between August 15 and the first killing frost is critical for root carbohydrate restoration; continued grazing will harm next spring's new grass growth, regardless of future precipitation.

4) **November 1:** IF < 80% of average annual precipitation has been received (measured from November 1 – October 31, considered the “water-year”, and moisture received during this period is indicative of forage productivity), THEN drought conditions will likely persist into the following spring and herd reductions should be anticipated.

Any adjustments to stocking density, including early weaning and herd culling, also must take into account changes to “normal” marketing. Producers may choose to feed calves to a more conventional weight to recapture reduced gross revenue.

These adjustments are not implemented lightly, but building a sound, scientific range management plan, and rigorously adhering to the trigger dates will yield long-range benefits. Protect your most valuable asset; keep your eyes way out in front and you will ultimately be rewarded.”

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