USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Nebraska Drought Fact Sheet for:

Pasture and Grazing

Who We Are

Inspired by a shared vision of agriculture as a valued component of the landscape, NRCS works in partnership with farmers, ranchers and many others to improve, restore and protect the Nation's natural resources.

Working side-by-side with these partners, we work to sustain and improve the quality of our soil, water, air and wildlife habitat, and we develop conservation plans that work for the land and for farmers and ranchers. Farm Bill programs help with the cost of putting conservation on the ground, which benefits the farm, the watershed and the community. Conservation easement programs, also in the Farm Bill, help to protect the agricultural and natural resource values of the land over the long-term.

With our help, Nebraska is balancing economic goals with a high quality environment–ensuring productive lands to supply food, fiber, forest and energy products for the Nation and the world.

The Affects of Drought

Drought conditions have greatly reduced forage availability in many parts of Nebraska. First cutting of hay had some reduction in yield and, in many areas, no second cutting was feasible. Currently, pastures have suffered yield reductions and normal production has been cut in some areas by at least forty percent from the average.

Grazing vs. Haying

Most cool-season forages such as brome have gone either partially or completely dormant. Managed grazing of these stands may have less negative impact on the stand than haying, because it will expose less of the sod and protect valuable cover. Pastures with good cover, dry or not, maintain a cooler soil temperature than ones with poor cover. Cooler soil temperatures could make the difference in whether the forage survives or not. With recent air temperatures above 100 degrees, pastures with poor cover had soil temperatures ranging from 90 to 101 at two inches of depth. Pastures with fair to good cover had soil temperatures from 74 to upper 80s. Cooler soils, even though dry, will be better for plant revival and should also slow oxidation of valuable carbon in the soil.

Grazing Periods

Forages will do best if allowed to rest after grazing periods to allow the plant to try and replace carbohydrate reserves. Producers become increasingly concerned that they are running out of forage to graze. They mistakenly open up all the gates and let the livestock pick and choose at their will. This drastically reduces adequate rest and promotes overgrazing, leading to weak and progressively slower responding forages. These overgrazed pastures will take much longer to recover once sufficient moisture returns, and if damage is prolonged enough, could be detrimental to the stand itself. Good productive forage stands are expensive to establish so care should be taken to prevent damage when possible.

Regrowth

Regrowth during a drought can be very limited. Livestock should ideally be allowed to graze to the desired ideal grazing heights as outlined in the 528 Prescribed Grazing Standard. The more leaf material left, generally the more roots being maintained and the quicker the response of new growth once moisture and improved conditions return.

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Rotational Grazing

Pasture suffering from drought

Pasture and Grazing
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Practice Substitution and Cover Crop Flexibilities

A major concern with the 2012 drought is the lack of available quality forage. Cover Crops grazed for forage must be managed under a prescribed grazing plan.

Producers are responsible for checking that their crop insurance policy allows cover crops to be used for forage.

Rotational Grazing

Rotating livestock allows forages to rest between grazing periods. During drought conditions, longer rest periods are better. If there happens to be heavier amounts of forage available, slowing the livestock down and concentrating them for very short durations will allow them to consume the best forage present, increase utilization and waste less. Allocating the forage in strips with temporary fence greatly increases control of the livestock and efficiency. During extended drought, rest periods can often exceed 60 to 90 days or more as compared to our normal 30 to 45 days during summer months.

Sacrifice Areas

If pastures have been grazed down to their minimum recommended heights and no regrowth has occurred, then producers should consider moving livestock to a sacrifice area and feed the livestock hay and supplements as needed. If no sacrifice area is available, then temporary fence could be used to create an area. The sacrifice area should have a fresh adequate water supply for periods with extreme temperatures. Feeding hay is better than allowing livestock to continuously graze forages and thus severely overgraze, weakening the pasture, reducing intake of the animals, and compromising most chances of any good regrowth once adequate moisture returns. Protected reserves have more potential of increased dividends of valuable forage for later on.

Reducing Numbers

Though it is not the first choice by most producers, reducing animal numbers may be one of the best options. Culling late, or out of season calving cows, to maintain body condition score animals is a good place to start. Readily marketable animals should be next such as stocker cattle or retained heifers. Early weaning of calves can also be an option. Reducing numbers, especially if numbers are possibly excessive even for a good year, will help stretch reserves, reduce any hay or supplements needed and allow for longer rest periods for the pasture.

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