

Deer Management During Drought  
Steve Nelle, Wildlife Biologist, NRCS

Long-term drought is one of the most depressing and damaging events that can happen to rangeland. The devastation to land, livestock, wildlife, plant life and people is something that no one can understand until they experience it. Once an area is in the midst of a major drought, there is little that can be done to lessen its impact. Only two things are certain: good rains will once again return; and drought will also return again. It is never too soon to learn from the current drought and to plan ahead in preparation for the next one.

The emphasis during and after a drought should be on the recuperation of the vegetation. When long-term catastrophic drought has occurred, desirable perennial vegetation may be very slow to return. Dead plants, bare ground, erosion are the aftermath of drought. It will take several years or more of good rainfall combined with very carefully managed grazing or no grazing to begin to see desirable grasses, shrubs and perennial forbs grow, regain vigor, make seed and begin to reproduce. Annual grasses and weeds, on the other hand, will come quickly as soon as the good rains return. This should not be interpreted as restoration of vegetation. It is only the first step. The lush production of filaree, tallweed, bladderpod, peavine, rescuegrass or other such annuals should not be the signal to re-stock the range. Re-stocking should be delayed until desirable perennial grasses make a good recovery.

The recuperation of wildlife will follow the recuperation of vegetation. If the economics of ranching continue as they have over the past 20 years, net income from wildlife will continue to increase while net income from livestock will be erratic and unpredictable. The landowner who desires to capitalize on this and maintain the ranch can follow the SAFE rule of ranching in an arid or semi-arid region:

- S - Stock conservatively
- A - Adjust quickly
- F - Flexibility
- E - Evaluate continuously

**Stock conservatively** means to keep significantly fewer livestock than what you think the range will carry. Remember that the next drought is just around the corner and a reserve of grass will allow you to absorb the shock of short-term drought. In West Texas, grass that is left un-grazed is never wasted.

**Adjust livestock numbers** early in a dry period. Adjust frequently as drought continues. Don't wait until the grass is gone to reduce stock numbers.

**Flexibility is the key** to being able to adjust livestock numbers quickly. With half or more of your normal stocking capacity as stocker type animals, you can preserve the base breeding herd and the desirable vegetation much longer. Flexibility will also allow you to take advantage of favorable years by bringing in extra stockers. Resist the temptation to increase breeding females during these good years.

**Evaluate continuously**, during wet times as well as dry times. Evaluations should include rainfall records, grass growth, livestock numbers, livestock performance, ranch economics, deer numbers, deer quality, etc. Monitoring of rangeland with fixed photo points can be very useful in recognizing long-term trends in vegetation.

The well-being of deer in West Texas is almost totally dependent upon the combination of rainfall and grazing management. We have no control over the amount of rain, but the rancher has full control over grazing. The harmful effects of short-term and medium-term drought can be softened by good conservative grazing management.