Following a dry Iowa summer where – at its height – more than 20 western Iowa counties fell into an “Extreme Drought,” the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) is encouraging Iowa’s livestock producers to consider adopting weather resilient, long-term drinking water sources, and alternative forage and grazing solutions for their pastures.

Currently, about 40 western Iowa counties are in a “Severe Drought” according to the most recent U.S. Drought Monitor. Adequate water and forages continue to diminish for grazing animals, causing producers additional expenses and labor to weather the drought.

Although southeast Iowa livestock producers are enduring dry conditions this year, it’s nothing compared to the extended drought they experienced from 2016 to 2018. Because of that long-term drought, many producers in the area worked with NRCS to implement practices such as livestock pipeline, watering facilities, prescribed grazing and water wells to help overcome drought conditions.

Through the NRCS-administered Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Iowa farmers contracted a record $9.2 million in 2018 for conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve water quality, and boost forage conditions on grass-based grazing operations.

“Many southeast Iowa producers reached out to us in 2017 and 2018 expressing a need for assistance on grazing lands,” said Jon Hubbert, State Conservationist for NRCS in Iowa. “We felt a need to help producers protect their grass resources and improve the long-term sustainability of their pastures.”

Davis County livestock producer Ed Good, a 2019 Iowa Farm Environmental Leader Award winner, spearheaded an effort to help local farmers. Davis County was at the heart of the drought and Good helped bring it to the attention of local, state and federal government leaders.

When the dust settled, NRCS provided special assistance through EQIP to local producers for drought-resistant grazing practices. “I think I was the first one to sign up for water in the county,” said a smiling Good.

In 2018, Davis County producers led Iowa with 192 EQIP contracts – most of them for grass-based livestock conservation practices. For perspective, the average number of EQIP contracts per county in Iowa that year was 14.

With the help of Good, local NRCS staff, and their conservation partners, word spread about the availability of financial and planning assistance. “The response was pretty incredible,” said Good. “If we get another drought, I don’t know anyone in the area who is not in pretty good shape for (livestock) water.”

The Payne Family, who operate Hillview Angus Inc. near Pulaski in Davis County, installed 18 livestock...
production, which also helps with dry times. He says his rotational grazing system allowed his pastures to remain productive during the prolonged drought. “Rotational grazing is not ‘one size fits all,’” said Smith. “Just a little rotating goes a long way.”

NRCS Grazing Specialist Stacy Prassas says resting pastures during rotational grazing allows plant roots to grow deeper and improve soil health. “Adam allows his pastures proper recovery time and that’s where he’s excelling and able to make it through drought conditions,” she said.

Smith admits he needed NRCS assistance for water. He implemented four new waterers using EQIP assistance in 2018. “That saved me because several of my ponds were new and held no water,” he said. “When it gets dry, the water gets scarce. We were moving our cattle to get rural water. Our ponds were just done.”

Smith feels water distribution throughout pastures is important for weather resilience. “Water locations are important. Put water everywhere you can on your farm,” he said. “If you get the watering system in place, then you have a plan for drought.”

Smith says NRCS planning assistance and conservation programs are a major reason why his pastures are in good condition. “I feel I have utilized the programs the way they are intended,” he said. “My system is usable and efficient, and I have NRCS to thank for that.”

Farmers can sign up for NRCS conservation programs on a continuous basis. Most NRCS offices are open by appointment only due to COVID-19, so please call ahead before visiting your local USDA Service Center. For more information about sustainable grazing practices, visit: www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/technical/landuse/pasture/.

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