

Drought Persistence and Cattle Decisions

Megan Van Emon, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist

Unfortunately, the drought continues to persist throughout Montana and relief is not forecasted. The current drought map has 92% of Montana in a drought, with almost half of the state designated as D3 and D4. The seasonal drought outlook map show that through May 31, 2022, the drought will persist for most of Montana and the Western United States. The persistent drought means tough decisions ahead for livestock producers.

Since the summer of 2021, many livestock producers have drastically reduced the number of cattle on their operations. Some producers even shipped cattle to the Midwest to graze corn stalks during the winter months due to the lack of pasture availability and price of harvested feeds. Cattle producers heavily rely on pasture for grazing and with the persistent drought, pastures will need extended time for recovery. If possible, delay cattle turnout to allow for additional pasture recovery. If adequate pasture is not available, additional feeds may need to be provided to ensure requirements are being met.

However, providing additional feed may not be an economical or viable option. Feed already accounts for upwards of 70% of input costs for producers and needing to provide additional feed during the grazing season can drastically increase feed costs. Additionally, many feeds have drastically risen in cost and may not be available in the area due to the on-going drought.

Due to the rising feed costs and the lack of pasture, strategic culling decisions may need to be made. Some culling decisions are easier to make than others, such as those cattle with production issues. Production issues can be varied, such as age, bad feet, bad teeth, bad udder, low-quality calf, thin cows, open cows, or late bred cows. Once these cattle have been culled, decisions become more difficult and are highly dependent on the goals of your operation. Other things to consider when making culling decisions include cattle efficiency and/or genetics. Efficiency can be defined in many ways depending on the operation, but a common method is pounds of calf weaned per cow body weight. Genetics is another area that is highly dependent on the goals of the operation. Old cows could be culled because their production has begun to decline, or the producer has moved on to different genetics. Young cows could be culled because they require additional labor and input costs, but they're the new genetic base for the operation. Another option is to reduce the number of heifers being kept for replacements.

Making these decisions is difficult and are highly dependent on the operation. Keeping accurate records of the cattle can help in making these grazing, feeding, and culling decisions as we continue with the drought. An additional consideration when selling/culling cattle would be to discuss the strategy with the banker to determine what tax implications may be occurring and the best financial strategies moving forward.