



A little rain doesn't fix it

Farmers and ranchers remain cautious as drought continues



Rains in the Brazos Valley early in 2012 helped this grass green up, but more rains are needed now to help warm-season grasses. Photo by Danielle Kalisek.

This might sound like a broken record, but it still rings true: Last year's drought was historic—the worst one-year drought in Texas' history. Though recent rains in some parts of the state have helped ease the pressure, farmers and ranchers remain cautious, remembering the pain of last year as they prepare for the future.

"If you look at what the climatologists are saying, the La Niña event expired around the end of April, and we are back to a neutral pattern," said Dr. Larry Redmon, Texas AgriLife Extension Service forage specialist in the Department of Soil and Crop Sciences at Texas A&M University. "We hope that means we should have better growing season moisture this year than last year, but we started out with a huge soil moisture deficit."

Dr. Travis Miller, AgriLife Extension program leader for soil and crop sciences at Texas A&M, said rains during the spring significantly improved the soil moisture throughout Central and North Texas, but a mixture of different conditions exist in other parts of the state, with much of South Texas, West Texas and the High Plains still very dry with little to no soil moisture.

"We had a record wet February in Brazos County, so it was a bizarre turn of events going from a really dry year last year to being really wet," Redmon said. "Consistent warm temperatures are helping our warm season grasses grow, and from a moisture standpoint, things are looking a lot better than they were last year."

Dr. Dana Porter, AgriLife Extension agricultural engineering specialist in water management at Lubbock, said her area of the High Plains started the planting season dry. "Despite localized rainfall, soil moisture is low in much of the area. Careful planning and irrigation management are warranted, especially where irrigation capacities are limited."

Growers typically count on rainfall, and irrigation is meant to be supplemental, but last year there was very little rainfall in the High Plains, Porter said. "They've had some rain in the state, but we're not out of the drought yet."

She also cautioned that although many people are tempted to believe the drought is over when rains do come, the soil is still very dry, and conditions still need to improve. "We got so far behind that we have

a lot of catching up to do," Porter said. "There are a lot of people out there still hurting because of the lack of water."

Such variations in rain and climate, along with the \$7.62 billion of agricultural losses in 2011 plus crop, hay and livestock losses, leave the question: What is the outlook for agricultural crops, forage and livestock this year?

Agricultural outlook

"It's not clear what kind of season we're going to have," Miller said. "I would say almost universally our ag producers and ranchers are going to be a little conservative this year, and they have a reason to be conservative. Folks lost an awful lot of money in 2011 and don't want to repeat that again this coming year."

The biggest concerns growers have, Miller said, are deciding whether to invest in the inputs—such as fertilizer and labor—required to plant crops and/or how much to invest with the little bit of moisture available. With a more conservative approach, he said, fewer acres of certain crops and more acres of other crops may be planted because of current moisture levels.

"Clearly I think we're going to see fewer acres of corn, and we had very few acres of soybeans last year anyway," Miller said. "We have a pretty good wheat crop in the ground; out on the eastern side of the state we're really in good shape, and the wheat crop looks pretty good. I think overall we'll see more sorghum and more cotton."

Porter said in the future many growers will be paying attention to refinements on irrigation management. Many growers are already using low-pressure center pivots, such as LEPA and LESA, and subsurface drip irrigation is still expanding in acreage.

"The key is not only using efficient irrigation systems but also managing them well," Porter said. "I can manage a good system poorly and get poor results, so refinements on managing those systems are equally important."

"A lot of irrigation information, fact sheets and other resources on drought management are available through AgriLife Extension, so this is a teachable moment for us." ⇨



Forage outlook

The drought took a toll on pastures, leaving most ranchers without any hay to cut and bare spots in the forage for livestock.

“A lot of our pastures, specifically hay meadows, were probably destroyed last year because of the drought,” Redmon said. “With bermudagrass, for example, if you have one variety, it may recover and spread to bare areas pretty rapidly if it’s fertilized properly. Other varieties may be very slow to heal up—it may take years, or it may be such that people have to reestablish.”

The outlook for hay production depends on where the hay meadow is located, what varieties are established and how well they have been managed, he said.

“If they were managed well—fertilized appropriately—a lot of those plants may have survived, and recovery would be more rapid and more complete than in other places where we may have a history of not fertilizing appropriately,” Redmon said. “The moisture part of it looks pretty good. How much of a crop was destroyed is site-to-site specific.”

Hay production will probably still not be as good this year as it was in years past because of destruction of some of these plants, he said. In addition, the high price of fertilizer hinders some ranchers. Fertilizer costs continue to be high due to global competition, the cost of fuel for transporting it and the cost of labor to spread it.

“A lot of people who have forages that need to be fertilized are actually backing off on fertilizing because of the price,” Redmon said. “So that’s not going to encourage a rapid recovery, and it’s not going to help these plants if we get into another drought because they’re already stressed. If we continue to mistreat them, the recovery of those plants, even with good moisture, is going to be very slow if not non-existent.”

With all of these challenges stacked up against forage supplies, it’s clear there is still a long road ahead.

“It could take this entire growing season to recover, given adequate moisture and fertility on the introduced side,” Redmon said.

Even with good moisture native grasses could take the rest of this year and maybe even next year to recover, he said, because many of those native grasses were killed, and recovery for them takes longer.

“Native forages are very tolerant of heat, drought and cold, but when they are destroyed it usually takes a longer time for them to recover,” Redmon said.

Livestock outlook

Last year in the extreme drought period, trucks with cattle trailers were lined up for blocks around auction barns all over the state as ranchers sold off their cattle at record-high prices for a drought period. Since then the liquidation has leveled off, but ranchers—those who are still in the cattle business—are maintaining reduced herds.

Both Dr. Bruce Carpenter, AgriLife Extension livestock specialist at Fort Stockton, and Stan Bevers, AgriLife Extension economist in management at Vernon, said cow numbers nationwide are lower than they have been in many years.

“It is safe to say that in most places that have not had rain, like where I live in West Texas, we’re pretty much out of the livestock business,” Carpenter said. “There are a few people hanging on and feeding them still, but I think the big liquidation has already taken place.”

The drought not only contributed to liquidation, but so did the high amounts the cattle sold for at the auction barn. “I’m not sure we’ve ever been through a drought when the cattle prices were as high as they were,” Carpenter said.

Bevers explained that demand for ground beef increased while beef cow numbers were limited prior to the drought. Culled females are the primary source for ground beef.

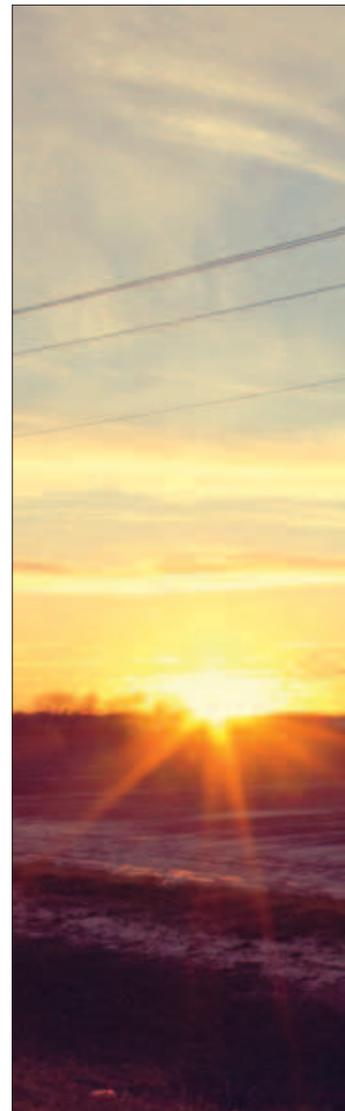
“During 2011, the United States liquidated roughly 1 million cows, with 600,000 of those mama cows coming from Texas,” Bevers said. “With that many cattle being sold, it may seem that a lot of cows and beef were put on the market, immediately increasing supply; however, demand was exceptionally high for ground beef, which in turn caused cattle prices to be so high at the auction barns.”

Destocking has been occurring for a long time now and not just because of drought. In 1975 the United States had about 45 million beef cows, he said. By Jan. 1, 2012, the nation had just under 30 million cows.

“In a 35- to 40-year period we’ve lost approximately 15 million head of beef cows in this country,” Bevers said. “So this was going on long before the drought happened; the drought only accelerated it.”

In 2012, about 34 million calves, including dairy calves, will be available for beef production or as replacement females, he said, which really is not that many calves.

Considering this large and continued decrease in the livestock population, rebuilding cattle herds might be difficult to imagine.





The sun sets over farmland on FM 60 between College Station and Snook as farmers hope for a better growing season this year than last. Photo by Danielle Kalisek.

“We will build the cow herd back; the question is, how big will we build it back? It won’t be back to the 45 million we once had in 1975,” Bevers said. “What’s a good number? Probably 32 (million) to 33 million head of cows is a good number. Now that can’t happen overnight.”

Cattle have a long production year until weaning time if the rancher decides to keep the calves, he explained. However, prices for calves are ranging from \$700 to \$850 a head, whereas in the past prices ranged from \$300 to \$400 per head, so some ranchers may want to take the cash now instead of waiting about 2.5 years for the replacement heifer to have a calf.

Restocking

Ranchers trying to decide whether to restock cattle have a lot to consider.

“If costs of buying cattle are high, and you have a high cost of production, then there’s that consideration,” Carpenter said.

Much of Texas’ rangeland is being shifted into other uses, he said, such as urbanization and hunting operations.

“There are a lot of things that go into the equation on why we aren’t restocking when it does rain,” Carpenter said.

In areas that received more rainfall and where grasses are green, some ranchers may be considering restocking. However, AgriLife Extension experts do not encourage ranchers to restock severely drought-damaged pastures until enough rain falls and grasses have time to recover.

Carpenter said pasture conditions in many areas can be deceptive because the perennial forages were taken down very low, and in some cases 100 percent of the “green grass” in pastures is annual ryegrass and clover. “That’s great for right now, but if it doesn’t rain later in the year we may be almost right back where we started.”

Redmon agreed. “We see all this green, and we keep getting rain, and people think they’ll stop feeding hay. Hay is expensive and ranchers don’t ⇨



have very much, and they think they'll let the cattle out there to fend for themselves. But there's not a lot out there to let them fend for. So we don't want to quit feeding too soon."

Ranchers should still be wary of restocking, he warned.

"I would be very, very hesitant about trying to rebuild the cow herd," Redmon said. "If you go back to what the climatologists have told us about the pattern we're in, this pattern may actually persist for several more years. Just because we get rain now should not suggest that we need to start restocking those cattle herds.

"We really need to take a 'wait-and-see' attitude and think about having more drought management built into the overall management plan as just part of routine business."

The key is maintaining a reduced stocking rate, Redmon said. Pastures have a lot of bare ground right now, and those holes need to be filled in with good coverage and good growth before ranchers start to think about bringing in more cattle, he added. "Then I would still be looking at long-term forecasts, trying to determine what the outlook is: What are they saying? Are we still in this pattern? Will it be dry this year or next year? To chase the weather with your stocking rate is financially disastrous."

There is one potentially positive result from reducing cattle herds, the experts added.

"I always say one silver lining is: If you didn't like the cow herd you had before, after the drought you've got a chance to put it back together the way you want it to be," Carpenter said.

When conditions improve and time for restocking comes, Carpenter recommended ranchers be cautious when transporting cattle either into or out of Texas. He said they should have a good herd health program in place and work with a veterinarian on any new arrivals.

"There are some diseases that traditional vaccines and traditional fixes don't work quite as well as we'd hope," he said. "Often we talk about a period of quarantine on new arrivals; we put them in pasture away from other cattle to make sure the vaccine has time to work."

Many challenges persist as drought conditions continue into 2012, the experts said, and farmers and ranchers should err on the side of caution as they manage water resources, crops and livestock.

Porter said this drought and its impact on so much of Texas agriculture should serve as a reminder. "We need to be careful how we manage all of it, even in the good years. Maybe this should get our attention that we need to manage our water resources better all the time, not just when we're in drought." 

February rains refilled and almost overflowed once-empty stock tanks in the Burleson County area as well as other areas throughout the state. Photo by Danielle Kalisek.

