



Managing Pastures During & After Drought

The summer of 2024 has been a challenging year for managing livestock and pastures. While widespread dry conditions are very common, in some areas, extreme drought conditions are causing producers to make difficult decisions. During a drought, very little can be done to increase forage pasture growth and managing for drought is complex and must take place throughout the year. With proper management, producers can minimize impacts on their pastures now and into the future.

During a Drought



Reduce Stocking Rates

An option to consider is reducing animal numbers when forage supplies are limited. Evaluate your herd and/or cull animals that are open, old, or in poor condition. Another option to consider for your farming operation is to early wean and sell young livestock (calves, lambs, kids, foals etc.). This will reduce stocking pressure on pastures and can help preserve body condition of lactating females because the high nutrient demand of lactation has stopped. These management decisions can have a significant impact toward protecting your pasture resources.



Control Weeds

Weeds compete with your desirable forage for moisture and nutrients. Actively controlling weeds during the drought can help reduce the competition for available water and nutrients. Consult with your county OSU Extension agent regarding herbicide recommendations.



Avoid Over Grazing

Pastures with little to no green growth are living off root reserves to survive. Overgrazing during a drought puts additional stress on the plant and accelerates the depletion of the root mass.

Managing rest and plant residual will be important for the recovery of the pastures moving forward. Depleting the root systems will limit the plant from recovering quickly when the rain returns. Having adequate plant residual in place will promote more rapid forage growth and recovery and help shade the soil surface while reducing soil temperature.

Livestock should be confined in a “sacrifice” area on the farm during prolonged droughts. While confined, animals can be fed supplemental grain or forage. Preventing access to the remaining pastures on the farm will prevent damage to the forage base and promote quicker recovery.



Water Sources

Water is a critical nutrient required by all livestock species. Poor quality, stagnant water can be a concern for producers during a drought. Limited flow in tanks or surface waters can expose animals to increased amounts of pathogens and parasites that significantly reduce animal performance. When choosing a sacrifice area, water availability should be your number one priority. A clean, consistent source of water will help ensure animal health and performance.



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After a Drought



Managed Grazing

Managed grazing operations give the producer the ability to withstand challenging times by giving the pastures an opportunity to rest and recover during the grazing season.

1. Maintain larger/healthier roots

Having more grass available above the surface equals more root mass below the soil. This allows for a higher water and nutrient uptake. More grass on the surface will help the plants recover carbohydrate stores, leading to an increase in persistence and longevity.

2. Maintain a lower soil temperature

Most pastures in Ohio are made up of cool-season plants (fescue, orchard grass, bluegrass, & clovers) that thrive in cooler weather. When the temperature reaches above 80 degrees, these plants will go dormant. By maintaining a lower soil temperature, cool-season plants can grow longer into the summer before going dormant.

3. Grow more forage

Implementing the principles of a managed grazing system (increased nutrient distribution, greater pasture utilization, longer periods for rest & recovery) will allow producers to grow more forage than a continuous grazing system.



Alternative Forages

As the current grazing season comes to an end, it is a good time to evaluate your feed inventory and determine what can be done in the months ahead. “Alternative” forages can help stretch the current feed supply through the winter and into the spring. Grazing/baling corn stalks is a good source to help stretch existing hay supply. Planting cereal grains as a cover crop is also a good option. The cereal grains will over winter and begin growing again in the spring allowing producers an additional source to graze while giving the perennial pastures an extended rest period. Warm-season perennial pastures (big bluestem, little bluestem, and Indian grass) thrive during hot/dry periods and can provide a consistent feed source in the summer months.



Treat Pastures as New Seedlings

The stress of a drought can impact a farm for multiple grazing seasons. Perennial species require adequate time to build back strength as their carbohydrate (energy) reserves recover. Looking ahead to next season, it is important to try to avoid overgrazing in the next grazing season. This can set your pastures back for that season and in the future.

For grazing assistance or a pasture consultation please contact the Ohio Department of Agriculture – Division of Soil and Water Conservation.



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