Management

If the Drought is Over: What about Weeds in Our Pastures?

By John Paterson, NCBA Executive Director of Education

A drought is not ended until we have rainfall sufficient to replenish deep soil moisture in our pastures. Heavy rainfall that provides runoff for reservoirs may not recharge subsoil moisture levels. It is the deep moisture in soil profiles that extends the time between rains to get forage growth and production through dry periods. Although all forages produce lower yield when drought occurs, some species including Bermudagrass and KY-31 tall fescue can tolerate heavy grazing pressure and still persist while other varieties are eliminated from the stand. Management of grazing pressure during prolonged dry weather is necessary to prevent loss of high-quality forage species such as novel endophyte fescue, clover and orchardgrass.

Chris Bryan, from DuPont’s Crop Protection Group, explained that order to rebuild pastures and rangeland, you may need to make changes to management techniques and timing of grazing. Overgrazing is a common occurrence during drought and many pastures require lighter-than-normal grazing pressure to allow perennial plants to recover. The roots are especially vulnerable to overgrazing. Overgrazing also results in increased weed pressure because weakened grass plants are less competitive than weed species for space, water and nutrients. Since bigger weeds are harder to control, it’s important to scout pastures and make timely herbicide applications while weeds are still small. Similarly, long-rooted weeds, including thistles, whitetop and multihora rose do well in drought years and control can be difficult. Overgrazing can also contribute to difficulties with weed control. Because overgrazing opens the soil to more sunlight, soils become hotter and often more packed around the root base. Shortening grazing periods and rotating cattle more frequently will help minimize stress on grasses and allow them to rebuild root reserves. It’s also important to be on the lookout for new weed species. Hay that was brought into the area during drought periods could have resulted in new weed seeds in your pastures. These newly introduced species could include poisonous varieties, so it’s critical that producers be on the lookout for weeds such as poison hemlock, yellow star thistle and houndstooth.

John Jennings from the University of Arkansas provides two good suggestions:

1. Plan for weed control

Many weeds are not readily grazed by livestock, especially varieties such as woolly croton and pigweed. These weeds can endure drought unnoticed as small plants and then grow rapidly at the first rain. The resulting shade drastically reduces any growth recovery of the pasture grass. Early control before the weeds cause problems will yield forage growth benefits later.

- Plan to overseed annuals at the proper time

Winter annuals such as ryegrass, wheat, rye, and even turnips saved a lot of farms during the fall and winter months. These forages can be planted in the dust at the recommended time and nearly always make a grazing crop. One such example might be planting turnips in late August. Forage turnips produced much needed forage by the end of October. Winter annuals planted in fall were grazed all winter.

Daren Redfern from Oklahoma State University explained that the use of a damage assessment criteria in pastures affected by drought may be helpful in developing a plan for improving forage and subsequent grazing conditions.

“Slightly damaged stands (less than 30 percent stand loss) should recover quickly with weed control, proper fertility, and deferred grazing or harvest once satisfactory growing conditions return,” he said. “Stands that are moderately damaged (between 30 percent and 60 percent stand loss) should fully recover with weed control, proper fertility, and deferred grazing or harvest.”

He also notes there are many tillers and seed that will aid in stand recovery. If these stands remain thin into the fall, it may be preferable to overseed with an adapted pasture legume or winter annual grass.

“Severely damaged stands (greater than 60 percent stand loss) are going to require an enormous level of patience for adequate recovery. If stands are thin in the fall, it may be preferable to overseed legumes or winter annual grasses,” said Redfern.

Dr. Jerry Volesky from the University of Nebraska also provided several recommendations for grazing pastures and rangeland, the year after a drought:

1. Delay initial turn-out to pasture.
2. Reduce stocking rates.
3. Use rotational grazing and graze pastures only once from turn-out to killing frost.
4. Utilize alternative forages.

“Other than in cases where a short, early grazing period is used to make use of weedy annuals such as downy brome, delaying turn-out will benefit the perennial grasses. The delay will allow the grasses to develop more leaves and reach a point where some of their depleted energy reserves can begin to be restored,” he said. “Remember, the greatest number of cow-days per acre will be obtained when pastures are not grazed until plants have completed most of their growth for the year.”

NCBA Members: We Need Your Comments

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers is working on the largest land grab in history. Their efforts to expand the definition of “Waters of the United States” will give them direct control over year-round and seasonal water on your property. We need each of you to submit comments against EPAs proposed rule. This effort will have major negative impacts on you and your neighbors.

“Despite what this administration may say and has said about providing ‘flexibility,’ and they have said that word, for farmers and ranchers in the proposed rule. The farmers and ranchers of America are not deceived. They will not be misled by this administration.” – Senator John Barrasso, R-Wyo.

The voices of cattlemen and women are being heard in Washington, D.C., but we need more voices of support. We need each of you to help us fight this proposed rule by submitting your comments. If you have already done so, please take a moment to recruit a new member to NCBA and encourage them to submit theirs. We are stronger when we stand together!

Submit your comments and join NCBA to stand together against EPA, visit: www.BeerUSA.org.

On June 25, 2014, Wyoming Republican Senator, John Barrasso testified against the proposed rule and quoted NCBA President, Bob McCann’s article in the June issue of NCBA’s National Cattlemen, noting that it serves as the Trusted Leader and Definitive Voice of the Beef Industry.