



SHEEP SHEET

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During 1996 many of the Central and Southwestern States faced serious drought consequences. Most of the media exposure and sound bites dealt with Texas, Oklahoma, and Eastern New Mexico, but little was mentioned about the Southwestern region, such as Arizona, Western New Mexico, SW Colorado, and Southern Utah. These areas, the land, the forage, the livestock and the producers also suffered great unknnowledged losses in livestock, income, and most experienced higher costs to retain smaller herds and/or flocks. Many, particularly the cow-calf producers under the umbrella of another year of poor cattle prices, liquidated their herds rather than risk facing high wintering costs and a repeated losses.

Unfortunately, drought is one of those 'acts of Nature' or 'of God' that knowledge and predictability are at best a good guess! Even with modern sattelite technology, and all of the highly trained meterologists on the 6 o'clock news, cannot with certainty state when the next drought will begin, where it will begin, the serverity, and how long it will persist. Although, statistically, most areas highly prone to drought situations have some predictability of frequency and cycle, but again, this is not perfect knowledge, but partial knowledge based on risk. Having live my entire life in the West, I have had the opportunity often enough to experience droughts, and learn to make, albeit unwanted, but necessary alternative management decisions about livestock and forage utilization. Sometimes, mistakes have been made, but none costly enough to warrant entire liquidation of a herd or flock. "Knock on wood!"

Definition: What is drought? The economic definition of a drought is the "cumulative effects of below-normal rainfall (snow/precipitation)",

Dealing with Drought!

Sheepdex G-1

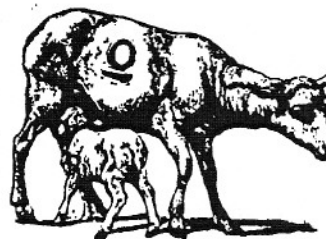
causing a reduction in production and/or an increase in costs resulting in lower net income. Another definition states that drought is a sharp decrease in rainfall in a given year. Or it may be defined as a sharp or prolonged decrease in range feed conditions.

Whatever definition is used, a drought is when soil moisture is deficient during a period of time, and enough to cause soil, plant, and animal damages and/or losses.

Consequently, livestock producers must face the following alternatives and choose those which can be adapted to their particular area, region, and situation(s):

Retain all stock and let them take their chances

To choose this alternative, producers would need reasonably good range and/or pasture feed reserves, sheep (or goats) in good condition and favorable prospects or moisture in that region for the next 3-4 months. Management decisions will need to be made in relation to this alternative. In order to reduce critical feed requirements lambs can be weaned at 6-8 weeks of age and put on the best feed, green feed, or confined (corraled) and fed oats and alfalfa chaff aftern having been taught to feed in the previous two weeks before weaning by feeding the ewes and lambs. The economics of this are questionable. Adult sheep can be fed a survival ration by controlled grazing and rationing it to animals without critical needs such as late pregnancy, lactation (nursing) or growth of young animals. Soil erosion must be watched with over-grazing!



Sale of wethers and cull ewes after shearing them

Sheep numbers can be reduced by selling good conditioned wethers and cull ewes after shearing them to get maximum income from wool and thus reduce carrying capacity as quickly as possible. The freight charges to market and the market price of such animals needs to be taken into consideration.

Feed the nucleus (main flock) of breeding stock to be carried through the drought

When shepherds are in a critical situation then quite tough decisions have to be made. Cull heavily all but a nucleus of sound-mouthed, sound legged, high producing breeding stock. Unwanted animals should be disposed of as soon as possible. Confine nucleus flock to a small area using solid or rocky ground with good, or relatively close source to water, and some shade if possible, if feeding is to continue for many months. Gradually start feeding ewes and lambs on oats (or other low cost energy feedstuffs over 1 to 2 weeks. Lambs can be safely weaned at 6 to 8 weeks of age if they weigh at least 20 pounds or more and feed onto the best green feed or grain plus good quality alfalfa hay in a separate confined area. Younger or lighter lambs cannot be weaned with safety. They may have to be destroyed. Sort off poor doers and shy feeders and either feed these separately or dispose of them. If may be possible to fatten for sale shy feeders and the best of the surplus stock on the remainder of the farm before the end of spring, if considered economical, with the nucleus confined and the consequent reduced stocking rate. Feed ewes for survival in this confined corral with approximately 8 inches of trough-side per sheep.

It is essential to calculate feed reserves and the minimum expected before effective precipitation is likely to return. Sheep require the equivalent of one pound of oats per head per day, or 3/4 lb. of barley or wheat, or 1 1/2 - 2 lbs. of hay (depending upon quality), or 3-5 lbs. of silage. Obviously, depending upon availability and cost, other roughages and concentrates (grains) or by-products should be considered. The economics of buying feed to feed even the nucleus of breeding stock is seriously questionable during periods of extended drought conditions, and depressed market prices of sheep and lambs.

Adjustments and relocation

Every avenue for possible relocation of the flock should be investigated before disposal of livestock at give away prices or at worst the wholesale destruction of animals. Producers should investigate the possibility of moving and relocating their flocks to other areas either in the region, the state or neighboring states for alternative grazing resources. Assistance for trucking to distant areas for relocation would be desirable in considering this alternative. For example, a few nucleus herds and flocks located in the southwest during this current drought have been able to move their animals further north in the Rockies and Midwestern states, where conditions have produced surpluses of feeds and forages in 1996. However, the overall costs and returns associated with this type of relocation should be evaluated before any decision is made.

For more information write The Navajo Sheep Project, Inc. PO Box 4454, Logan, UT 84323-4454. The Navajo Sheep Project is a registered non-profit Utah corporation.