

DROUGHT MANAGEMENT

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As we enter the critical monsoon during the current drought, herd liquidation continues on Arizona ranches. Three primary issues must be considered during this period; conservation of capital, preservation of the forage base and sacrificing herd genetics. Three possible alternatives during liquidation is selling the non and least productive animals; selling the most valuable to raise the maximum amount of capital or complete herd liquidation.

Preserving herd genetics and positioning the herd for recovery after the drought are best served by keeping younger, pregnant females. Young replacement animals and old cows and bulls have higher nutrient requirements and are less suited to perform during a drought than 4 to 6 year old cows. In addition early weaning calves will reduce the nutrient requirements for the dams by approximately 20% and will increase the probability of getting these females bred. A bred female is invaluable, this will be your production as you emerge from the drought. Non-pregnant females will delay herd production recovery one year.

Selling the most valuable animals will raise the most capital. Currently a strong demand exists for quality cow-calf pairs and bred cows. Areas of the mid west and south are currently restocking. Reports of \$750 or \$800 pairs are not uncommon. Given this price level, herd liquidation is an option. This will probably provide sufficient capital for herd expansion at a later date. The downside is the reduction of the genetic base and selling animals adapted to your range conditions.

Complete herd liquidation is also an option. In some situations this may be required, however in addition to “selling the factory”, you have disbanded your herd genetics. This may result in preservation of the forage base, however wild ruminants may continue to exert grazing pressure on the range. Another consideration of complete herd liquidation is the impact on capital and debt service. In the past severe droughts have resulted in marketing animals at less than the amount of debt secured by these animals. This has resulted in the liquidation of other resources, typically real estate, and in the more severe cases, bankruptcy.

Early weaning calves is another challenge. The primary consideration should be the development of the calf's immune system prior to weaning. At weaning, it is usually best if the calves can be kept on the ranch for 45 days. This allows the animals to be weaned and given the TLC necessary to minimize health issues. It is also important to maintain the calves on an adequate plane of nutrition. Two-thirds hay, one-third grain with vitamin and mineral supplements will provide an adequate diet. Start the animals slowly on the hay and grain, making sure adequate supplies of clean water are available. It is also advantageous to minimize the dust during this time period, reducing animal stress.