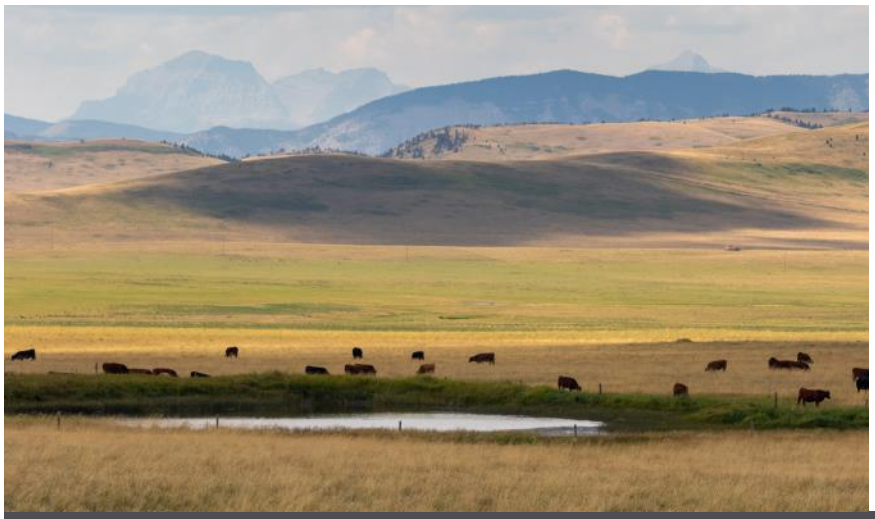

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GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS
APRIL 2021

Coordinator's Note - Sonja Bloom

Howdy folks!

It's starting to look a lot like spring with the first Prairie Crocus blooming and the ever present wind starting to feel just a touch warmer these days. Over at FFGA we have been busy navigating working from home, dealing with equipment malfunctions and striving to provide you with timely, relevant information virtually with webinars, conferences and meetings.

On March 23rd FFGA hosted our Annual General Meeting virtually for the first time ever. With public health restrictions in place, offering an in-person event was impossible and after a year of hosting webinars we figured it was time to try our luck on a virtual event. While there was a few extra details to figure out on the back end, I can safely say that the AGM was a success. Ryan Boyd, 2019 Nuffield Scholar, provided insights and thoughts on his studies around *Grazing Ruminants: a resilient, long term solution to agricultural productivity, profitability, and climate change.*

Ryan's studies took him to South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, Florida, Georgia, Texas, California, NSW-Australia and the UK where he quickly discovered that natural systems agriculture with managed intensive grazing was going to become the future of his own farm. His motivation for pursing this topic was to discover ways to make Regenerative Agriculture "pay" on his operation and on operations across Canada. If his research sounds interesting to you I encourage you to watch his 57 minute presentation at https://www.foothillsforage.com/recordedwebinars

Following Ryan's presentation was FFGA's business meeting. During the meeting there was an election held for 5 places on the FFGA Board of Directors. Secretary-Treasurer Justin Blades was re-elected and began his 2nd 3-year term on the board. Ryan Scott, Wolter van der Kemp, Jerry Baerg and Morrie Goetjen were elected to serve their 1st term on the board. We said good-bye to outgoing directors Mike Roberts, Steve Yule, Ben Campbell and Chairman Alex Robertson. Thank you to our current and past directors for your passion and dedication to FFGA, we wouldn't be who we are without you. After the AGM the board met to elect the Executive. Congratulations goes to our Chairman Rod Vergouwen, Vice-Chairman Daniel Doerksen, Secretary-Treasurer Justin Blades and ARECA Rep Marcel Busz. If you see any of our directors out this year be sure to stop and say hello!

Speaking of events, after a very busy winter & spring FFGA is taking a short pause to evaluate our membership survey and start planning more events focusing on your needs. This is a great time to connect with our staff and board to give us feedback on what you would like to see presented this year. It's our hope that public health restrictions will be relaxed and that we can host smaller in-person field events this year combined with more virtual webinars and conferences; stay tuned to our newsletter, social channels and website for future announcements!

Wishing you all the best as we head into the growing season!

Cheers;
Sonja Bloom

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Ground Squirrel Control in Montana


Photo: Pixabay

Richardson Ground Squirrels are meadow and grassland rodents and are the most prominent species of ground squirrel found in Montana. Because of their preferred habitat, Montana has large populations of ground squirrels throughout much of the state in cropland, pastures, golf courses and urban settings.

The Columbian ground squirrel is found on the western side of Montana. With minor variations (primarily related to later timing of treatments), the control methods described here can be used for Columbian ground squirrels.

Control methods are recommended at times when land becomes damaged or overpopulated by ground squirrels. Research in Montana has shown a 24 percent average reduction in alfalfa forage yield in areas infested with ground squirrels. Hay losses due to ground squirrels in Montana could exceed $15 million annually.

Identification

People often refer to ground squirrels as "gophers." This nickname can be an issue because there are species-specific control methods for both ground squirrels and pocket gophers.

As with other ground squirrels, the Richardson ground squirrel looks more like a tree squirrel (Figure 1) whereas pocket gophers look more like short-tailed rats with cheek pouches and large incisors. Richardson ground squirrels can be yellowish-tan to gray in color. Adults reach 12 inches in length with a 2-4 inch tail.

Ground squirrels spend a considerable amount of time above ground, whereas pocket gophers spend 99 percent of their life underground.

Habitat & Biology

Ground squirrels live in an extensive system of burrows up to six feet in depth with multiple entrances to the surface that are left open (pocket gophers plug their entrances). Ground squirrels feed above ground and their diet consists of grasses, forbs and seeds. They also store large quantities of food in their burrows before hibernation which begins as early as August.

Males emerge after hibernation, during early spring to establish territories. Female ground squirrels emerge one to two weeks after the males and immediately begin breeding.

Following a 28-day gestation, 2-14 young are born. This large amount of offspring can lead to densities of over 20 ground squirrels per acre.

Young exit the burrow at around five weeks of age to begin foraging. Mortality rates amoung young ground squirrels is very high due to predation and exposure while trying to establish a new territory.

Damage Prevention & Control Methods

When controlling a ground squirrel population, it's more economically sound to eliminate the population than to reduce it. Because ground squirrels have an average litter size of 10 and a maturity age of 10 months, their populations can multiply quickly. Even with a juvenile mortality rate of 85 percent because of exposure, starvation, predation, etc., it's best to eliminate the adults before they reproduce for a better chance of control.

Cultural Methods and Habitat Modification

Ground squirrels typically build the major part of their burrows at the edge of fields then extend into the field as the colony matures. Tillage is an effective way to regenerate an area by covering tunnel holes and flattening mounds so the area can be replanted. This will make the area less attractive to nearby colonies that may expand. There have been studies that indicate the tall grasses may lead to reduced ground squirrel reinfestations.

Flood irrigation of fields will also limit ground squirrel use of an area.

Exclusion

Exclusion of ground squirrels is typically expensive and impractical. Ground squirrels can easily climb and dig around most barriers. Ground squirrels rarely damage shrubs, trees, and other ornamentals, but if damage occurs, barriers can be made of wire mesh or cylindrical plastic netting.

Repellents and Frightening Devices

Repellents and frightening devices such as noise making and ultrasonic devices have not been proven to control ground squirrel populations when tested in unbiased research trials.

Flooding

Flooding tunnel systems will sometimes force rodents from their burrows if the burrows are not extensive and soils are heavy. As the animals try to escape they can be killed. Always take precautions when flooding burrows that are adjacent to structures that may be damaged by water.

Natural Control

Predators such as raptors, snakes, coy-

(Continued on page 3)

On the Cover: Cows grazing one of the many paddocks on the Waldron Ranch, Fall 2020. Photo: FFGA

Thank you to our municipal supporters!

(Continued from page 2)
otes, and badgers will feed on ground squirrels. Predators however, will not effectively control a ground squirrel population. Although they take a number of individuals, the predator success rate declines before the population is significantly reduced.

Toxicants

Always use rodenticides according to label instructions.

Early spring is the best time for ground squirrel control, especially when applying toxicants. This is because males and females have just emerged from hibernation and there is little green vegetation available. Also, by late spring-early summer, green-up has occurred which makes the vegetation much more palatable to ground squirrels than baits. Birth and emergence of young also occurs later in spring, increasing the number of animals that must be baited.

There are several toxicants registered for ground squirrel control in Montana. Always read the label before purchase because some chemicals are labeled "restricted use." This means that you must possess a pesticide applicator license to purchase the product. Although most farmers and ranchers possess the required license, homeowners are usually limited to purchasing "general use" pesticides.

Zinc phosphide and anticoagulants such as chlorphacinone (Rozol®) are restricted use toxicants registered for ground squirrel control. ALWAYS follow label directions for safe and effective use. These products are placed near the entrance of each burrow.

Zinc phosphide is a single dose rodenticide and can have a control rate of 90 percent. Because it is distasteful to ground squirrels, zinc phosphide treatments require pre-baiting with clean, untreated oats so ground squirrels will accept the bait. Zinc phosphide treated bait is distributed two to three days after pre-baiting and should be distributed when the ground is dry and rain is not forecasted.

Chlorphacinone (Rozol®), because it is an anticoagulant poison, must be fed over a period of several days to be effective. The product is placed outside each burrow opening and then reapplied a few days later.

****Strychnine is being phased out.** Strychnine can still be purchased in Alberta at various municipalities (supply very limited) in 2021. After this year, Strychnine purchases will no longer be available. Producers will have until 2022 to use their supply of Strychnine to control Richardson Ground Squirrel. On March 4, 2023 the use of Strychnine to control Richardson Ground Squirrel will be prohibited.

Bait Stations

Bait stations are used to provide a continuous supply of anticoagulant bait for ground squirrels (Figure 3). As the ground squirrels feed on the bait over several days, anticoagulant baits cause internal bleeding by disrupting the ability of blood to clot. Compared to single lethal dose rodenticides, secondary hazard to non-target animals is reduced when using anticoagulant baits.

Diphacinone (Ramik®) is a general use anticoagulant that can be purchased without a pesticide license. Ramik® is labeled for use in bait stations. Always follow label directions when using Ramik®.

Bait stations can be made from three, 24-inch-long pieces of PVC pipe. Pieces are connected with a tee and a cover on the upright part of the tee with a removable cap. Stand the stations upright (spaced 65 yards apart) and attach to a fence post or a post driven into the ground. Remove the cap and fill the tube with bait. Ground squirrels enter the bait station through the horizontal pipes and eat the bait, which is made available as it drops down from the capped vertical pipe. **It is very important to keep the bait stations supplied continuously with the anticoagulant bait.**

Fumigants

Fumigation can be effective for controlling ground squirrels when soil is moist enough to minimize diffusion of gas and the tunnel system is not too extensive. Restricted use products such as aluminum phosphide tablets (Phostoxin®) are effective and there are also many types of gas cartridges that are available for general use.

Trapping

Smaller populations of ground squirrels can be controlled with traps. Body-gripping (Conibear®) traps (6 inch x 6 inch) are placed over all open holes (Figure 4). It is best to use several to dozens of traps so trapping can begin on one end of the colony and work across the area. If other wildlife or pets are a concern in small areas, milk crates can be placed over body gripping traps for safety purposes.

Live traps (5x5x18 inch) also work for ground squirrel control when baited with peanut butter and rolled oats. Releasing the trapped ground squirrel is not recommended due to the fact that the animal will try to return to their original colony or, will be driven off if placed in a new colony and will most likely die of starvation, exposure or predation while trying to relocate. Drowning is a humane and safe way of disposing of a live-trapped ground squirrel.

Traps should be checked daily and moved if not sprung within 48 hours.

Shooting

Some people enjoy shooting ground squirrels as a recreational pursuit. However shooting is not an effective method of population control. Shooting ground squirrels is time-consuming, expensive and the animals tend to become extremely cautious. This method will typically reduce the population until juveniles dispersing from nearby colonies reoccupy the vacated burrows.

Other methods

Propane exploding devices are advertised to control ground squirrel populations. These devices inject propane into the burrow and it is ignited. Even though the resulting explosion is certainly impressive and some operators have reported some degree of control, these devices are expensive. Tests by the Montana Department of Agriculture have found propane exploding devices to be less effective than other methods of control.

Gumballs have also been reported to clog the intestinal tract of ground squirrels. These reports are not backed by research and there is no evidence that ground squirrel populations will consume enough gumballs to result in reliable control.

Author: Jim Knight, Ph.D., MSU Extension Wildlife Specialist, and Joe Parks, MSU Toole County Extension Agent

Original article can be found at: https://agresearch.montana.edu/wtarc/producerinfo/entomology-insect-ecology/Gofers/MontGuideGroundSquirrel.pdf

***Edits have been made by FFGA to the Strychnine portion of this article to reflect the current rules and regulations in Canada.*

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The Orphan Well Association and Your Land

After OWA Work. Photo Supplied

Do you have orphan oil and gas infrastructure on your land and are wondering what happens next?

The Orphan Well Association (OWA) is responsible to decommission and reclaim the site. The OWA operates under the legal authority of the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) and is a not-for-profit, industry-funded organization that works to decommission and reclaim the wells, facilities, and pipelines left behind by defunct oil and gas companies.

How the OWA works

When a well, pipeline, facility or associated site no longer has a legally or financially responsible party that can be held accountable, it is known as an 'orphan.' At this point the orphan becomes the OWA's responsibility, and work will be undertaken to safely decommission the infrastructure and restore the land as close to its original state as possible.

To complete this work, the OWA hires experienced contractors with excellent safety records. Throughout the process, the contractors strictly adhere to Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) and Alberta Environment and Parks (AEP) regulations and requirements.

Is it an orphan?

When it comes to which sites are considered orphans, only those with no responsible party are formally designated as orphans by the AER. Until the AER designates the site as an orphan, the OWA cannot undertake work on the site.

Within a month of a site being designated as an orphan, landowners will receive a letter from the OWA that will outline our process and seek your input on the site. A listing of all orphans in the Province can be found on our website (http://www.orphanwell.ca/about/orphan-inventory/). If you have not received a letter and cannot find the well listed on the OWA website, landowners are encouraged to contact the AER to determine who is responsible for the site. The AER may be contacted at 1.855.297.8311 or LiabilityManagement@aer.ca.

Not all inactive sites are considered orphan under provincial regulations. Some sites may be operated or owned by a solvent company or may be under the custody of a court-appointed receiver to be sold. In other cases, the defunct operator may have working interest partners (WIPs), which are viable partners that hold some working interest in the well, pipeline or facility. These WIPs are then legally responsible for the decommissioning or reclamation work.

New legislative changes may allow the OWA to work on these WIP sites, but only in cases where the OWA and the WIP have signed an agreement.

What does this mean for you as a landowner?

After arranging access on your land, contractors will perform an inspection of the infrastructure. Once everything is deemed safe, and equipment is documented and photographed, the OWA will place signage at the site indicating the location is now under the care of the OWA.

A company will then be assigned to safely plug the oil and gas wells, otherwise known as decommissioning (abandonment in regulatory terms). The wells are plugged, cemented, and the surface wellhead is cut below ground. Cutting below ground will allow landowners to safely cultivate over the former well. Crews will also remove any equipment in the area and then purge and decommission any accompanying pipelines.

At this point, your land will be ready for remediation, if required, and reclamation.

Once sites have been examined, crews will work to clean up any contamination that may be present (remediation). This may involve using a hoe or small drill rig to determine the extent of contamination. Any realized contamination is typically excavated and sent to an industrial landfill for disposal or treated on site. Clean backfill, if required, is sourced with landowner approval before being brought in.

The reclamation process includes removing any leftover gravel on site, recontouring the site to original drainage patterns, replacing topsoil and returning the lease and access road to its previous state. Weeds are also controlled at this stage.

Once work is complete, a reclamation certificate will be obtained from the AER, and the land can again be used as it once was.

Access to your land

Due to the downturn in the economy in recent years, the OWA has accelerated work because of the need to reclaim thousands of upstream orphan oil and gas sites in Alberta. This may mean that the OWA will need to access your land throughout the year, regardless of what agricultural stage your land is in. The OWA appreciates your cooperation in allowing access for work crews. Wherever possible we will limit our footprint to the former lease and access road held by the defunct company. If off-lease work is required, the OWA will compensate landowners for any off-lease access.

Of course, throughout the process, the OWA will be in constant communication with landowners, keeping you up to date about what is happening. The OWA is committed to developing positive relationships with landowners while minimizing impact to any agricultural practices.

What the OWA can and can't do

While the OWA does not take place of the former operator, the regulations grant the OWA the legal right to access both public and private land to complete work on a well, facility or pipeline that has been deemed an orphan. Any surface lease remains in the name of the defunct operator. As such, the OWA is unable to compensate landowners/occupants for unpaid surface lease payments from any defunct company. Landowners may apply to the Alberta Surface Right Board (SRB) for the recovery of unpaid surface leases. For information respecting these payments, please contact the SRB (toll free at 310-000, then 780 427 2444) or visit their website at https://surfacerights.alberta.ca/.

The OWA enjoys a long history of working closely and cooperatively with landowners. In rare cases, some landowners have restricted access in an attempt to secure unpaid lease payments from the OWA. In these circumstances the OWA has an obligation to inform the SRB of

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the situation. Section 36(8) of the Surface Rights Act gives the SRB the discretion to not grant any payments if the landowner is refusing access for decommissioning and reclamation.

Landowners can obtain further information regarding the impact of restricting access through the Farmers Advocate Office at 310-FARM (3276) or visit https://www.alberta.ca/farmers-advocate-office.aspx, or the Pembina Institute at https://www.pembina.org/pub/landowners-primer-what-you-need-know-about-unreclaimed-oil-and-gas-wells).

Interested in learning more about the OWA? For additional information please visit www.orphanwell.ca or contact the OWA at via email at landowner@orphanwell.ca.

Helpful Definitions:

Orphan

When a well, pipeline, facility or associated site no longer has a legally or financially responsible party that can be held accountable. This requires formal designation by the AER.

Inactive

A well or site is considered inactive when there has been no production for one year (six months in the case of a sour well). An inactive site may be due to economic or technical reasons.

Decommissioned (Abandoned)

Sometimes referred to as abandonment or decommissioning, the well is permanently plugged and cut off below ground, pipelines are purged and cut-off, and any associated surface equipment removed.

Remediation

The process of cleaning up any contamination left on site. Contaminants are managed and removed according to AER and AEP requirements. Contaminated soil may be hauled to a landfill and then replaced with clean soil, or may be treated onsite until it meets AEP guidelines.

Reclamation

The process of returning the land to how it looked and was used before oil and gas development took place. This may involve recontouring the subsoil, replacing the topsoil, and re-establishing the vegetation.

Article submitted by the Orphan Well Association. Learn more about them at https://www.orphanwell.ca/

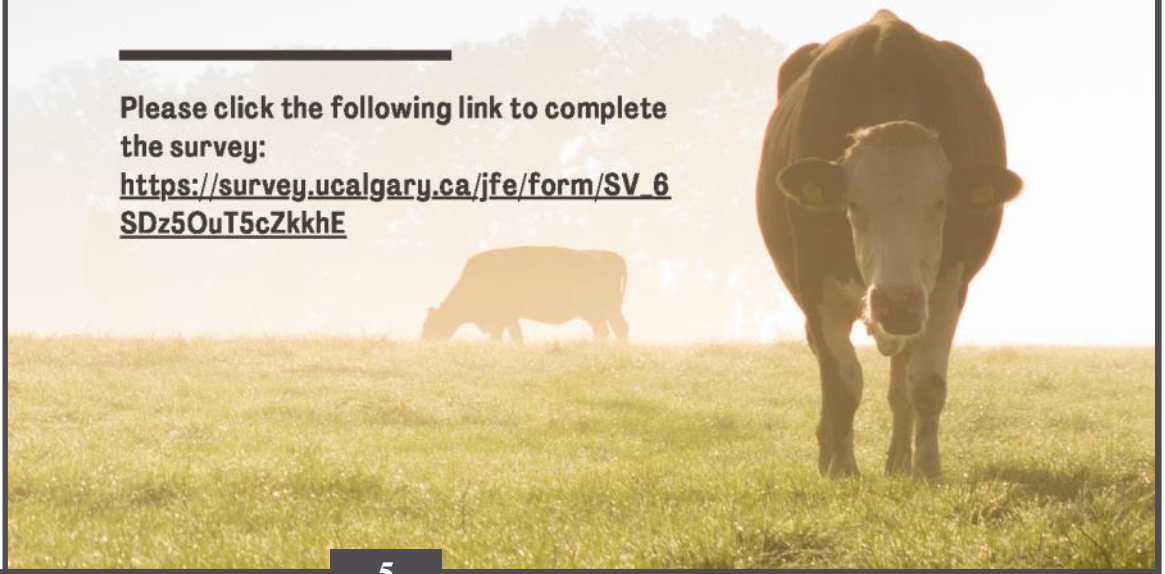
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

WATER & AGRICULTURE POLICY RESEARCH SURVEY

Water is critical for successful farming and ranching, but too much or too little can create problems as is well known in the water scarce region of Southern Alberta. With climate projections predicting more severe drought and flood events in the future, it is clear that both water and agricultural policy and management may need to change to support a thriving farm and ranch community.

A research team from the University of Calgary wants to understand what farm and ranch practices or policy changes may provide more stable and effective agricultural futures. By taking the time to complete a short survey (10-15 minutes), you will not only help this study, but will raise awareness about the needs and opportunities for long term agricultural success in southern Alberta.

Please click the following link to complete the survey:
https://survey.ucalgary.ca/jfe/form/SV_6SDz5OuT5cZkkhE



Forage 2021: Grazing and Forage Management During and After Drought


Stock Photo: Pixabay

Winter is a good time of year to begin making grazing and forage plans for the upcoming season. Of course, there can be a tremendous amount of uncertainty on what type of growing conditions we will see in the spring and summer. This is especially true if we had droughty conditions the previous summer or little fall and winter precipitation.

Precipitation and Pasture Growth

Total plant production on native rangelands is dynamic and influenced by multiple weather-related factors. The most important factor influencing yearly plant production is the amount of growing season precipitation, which can vary widely in different years. Plant production directly influences appropriate year-to-year stocking rates. In dry years with limited plant production, livestock forage demand often exceeds available plant production and livestock producers are faced with decisions of overutilizing pastures, selling cattle, or finding alternative feed resources. In years with above average precipitation, plant production supply may be greater than livestock grazing demand.

As one would expect, the timing and duration of drought conditions are key in the resulting effect on pasture growth. Dry conditions in April and May would impact growth of cool-season grasses and dry conditions from mid-May to mid-July would have a more pronounced effect on warm-season grasses. Spring temperatures may also affect the start of the growing season and use of available soil moisture. During the 2012 drought, many areas in central and eastern part of the state had a moderate amount of precipitation during April; however, drought conditions intensified beginning in May and remained through the rest of the year. Observations in the Sandhills showed cool-season grasses achieving about 40 to 70 percent of the average growth, while warm-season grasses attained about 30 to 60 percent of their average growth. Most warm-season grasses had stopped growth by late June and were going into a drought-induced dormancy.

For many livestock producers, carryover or residual grass from the previous growing season can help support stocking rates that were higher than what would have been anticipated just based on grass production during a dry growing season. If the previous year was dry, and the amount of carryover forage is limited, producers should consider this in their cattle number and stocking rate plans.

Grass and Rangeland Response to Drought

The primary response and effects of drought on grasses and pastures include:

- Reduced aboveground growth.
- Reduced root growth.
- Fewer reproductive tillers (seed heads) and plants remain mostly vegetative.
- Severe drought will cause plants to go into dormancy.
- Reduced growth of rhizomes and formation of new buds that will produce next and future year's tillers.
- Lower carbohydrate (energy) reserve storage.

Although most pasture grasses are quite resilient, it is common to expect that production during the year following a drought will be reduced, even with average precipitation. The reasons for this are most likely associated with the reduced root and rhizome growth, formation of new buds and overall energy reserve status of the plants. The exact amount reduced forage production the year after a drought is difficult to predict because the precipitation patterns and severity of each drought are rarely the same. In addition, the precipitation amounts and timing this coming year are unknown. However, rangeland that is in a higher ecological state or range condition will recover quicker after drought than lower condition range.

Timing of grazing is an important factor in grazing management and a common recommendation is to avoid grazing in the same pasture at the same time each year. Previous research has shown that repeated annual grazing during the rapid growth stage will reduce the overall vigor of grasses. This rapid growth phase is when grass plants are transitioning from a vegetative to elongation and reproductive stages. This rapid growth phase typically occurs in May for cool-season grasses and during June and July for warm-season species. Combining drought and grazing stress will greatly increase the likelihood of reduced forage production in the subsequent year.

Drought Grazing Plans and Management

The uncertainty of how much spring and early summer precipitation will occur suggests the need for plans that include multiple scenarios. These scenarios might include: 1) average or above average precipitation during that period, 2) abnormally dry to moderate drought (60 to 90 percent of average precipitation, or 3) continued severe drought (less than 50 to 60 percent of average precipitation).

Regardless of which scenario comes true, the primary focus should be about balancing forage supply (growth, production) and demand (animal numbers). Keep in mind that grazing management through consecutive drought years is critical for future pasture health.

For pastures and rangeland, common recommendations for the year after a drought include:

- Delaying initial turn-out to pasture.
- Reduction of stocking rates.
- Capitalize on growth of weedy species that might occur.
- Use rotation grazing and in central/western Nebraska, graze pastures only once from turn-out to killing frost.
- Use alternative forages.

After a long period of feeding hay, delaying turn-out to pasture is one recommendation that many producers find difficult to follow. Other than cases where a short, early grazing period is used to make use of weedy annuals, like downy brome; delaying turn-out will benefit the perennial grasses. The deferment will allow the grasses to develop more leaves and ideally reach a point where some of their depleted energy reserves can begin to be restored.

Where deferred rotation grazing (4 or more pastures) is used, deferment priority

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should be given to pastures that were grazed when grasses were green and did have some growth occurring before they went into drought dormancy. Overall, 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.

Using Critical Dates to Help Plan

Many ranch drought plans suggest the use of 'critical' or 'trigger' dates. The concept is based on monitoring precipitation amount received by these defined dates and initiating certain management actions when those precipitation amounts are less than anticipated. Management actions vary by individual ranch operation and would include things such as various levels of culling on livestock classes, feeding hay, finding additional pasture, drylot feeding of animals, or using seeded forages. Precipitation amounts and critical dates vary for different pasture and rangeland types and location. Critical date plans and actions are flexible over time and it does often take several years of records and observations to refine the plan for an individual operation. In general for Nebraska, important periods and dates are as follow:

- Previous growing season: Consider the previous year's pasture production and level of utilization. Drought in the previous year will likely be reflected in lower production during the current year because of reduced vigor in the grass plants.
- April 1: end of dormant season (October through March). Precipitation to this point supports early cool-season grass growth.
- May 1: Precipitation to this point is the basis for cool-season grass growth. The amount of moisture in the soil profile at this point will also affect the rapid growth of cool-season grasses that occurs during May and is the basis for early warm-season grass growth.
- June 15: Precipitation to this point is the basis for warm-season grass growth. Moisture in the soil profile will also affect the rapid growth of warm-season grasses that occurs during late June and July.

Author: By Jerry Volesky, UNL Extension Range and Forage Specialist out of Nebraska (which is the area that this article was written for. However, the information is relevant for agriculture in Alberta). Original article can be found at: https://www.tsln.com/news/special-interest/forage/grazing-and-forage-management-during-and-after-drought/

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