

Managing Livestock During Drought: Destocking and Early Weaning

Never feed your way out of a drought – it will bankrupt you economically, financially and ecologically

Range- and pasture-based livestock producers have two basic options for reducing stocking rates (and forage demand) during a drought: destocking and early weaning. While most producers have culling criteria that they use every year, drought conditions may require producers to go beyond their normal considerations to further reduce herd or flock size. Early weaning can also reduce forage demand – the sooner an animal’s offspring is weaned, the sooner that female can dedicate energy to restoring body condition in anticipation of the next breeding season (instead of milk production).

Destocking

Typically, a producer will cull females based on productivity – an open (un-bred) cow or ewe is sold. Drought conditions, however, may require a more aggressive culling strategy. The most effective strategies are developed before drought occurs. You might consider identifying an “A” herd (animals you will keep) and a “B” herd (animals that can be sold during drought). Under this approach, you should also determine the minimum number of females necessary to maintaining the genetic pool if the “keeper” herd.

Here are some additional factors to consider when deciding whether to keep or cull a specific animal:

- Productivity (as measured in pounds of lambs, calves or kids weaned): keeping females that under-produce can compromise the health and productivity of your higher producing females by utilizing scarce forage and water resources. Obviously, this requires careful record-keeping.
- Age: research at the UC Sierra Foothill Research and Extension Center has demonstrated that weaning weights of calves and pregnancy rates decline dramatically in cows that are 10 years of age or older. Drought can be good time to cull older animals.
- Behavior: most herds contain individual animals whose behavior presents management problems. For example, a ewe that has learned not to respect electric fence may teach other sheep to escape. A cow that is aggressive when being worked in the corrals can be dangerous. Drought can present an opportunity to remove these problems.
- Physical Health: low performance may be related to physical health issues – foot rot in sheep, for example. Aggressively culling animals for physical problems can improve overall herd productivity in the long run.
- Genetics: Drought can present an opportunity to analyze and adjust the genetic composition of your herd. Again, detailed record-keeping is crucial. Animals whose genetic potential fits the production system and resources of the ranch should be retained; those who do not should be culled.

Destocking also requires producers to examine their female replacement strategies and capacity for running stockers or feeder animals. Reduced forage supplies may mean keeping fewer replacement heifers or ewes and reducing the number of calves or feeder lambs kept or purchased as stockers.

Early Weaning

Weaning calves, lambs or kids earlier than normal is another effective strategy for surviving drought. Females experience their highest nutritional demand when lactating. In addition, heifers, ewe lambs and doelings have even greater nutritional demand because their bodies are still growing, which requires energy and protein levels above that of mature females. Early weaning can allow females to regain body condition prior to breeding and may help boost conception rates during times of drought.

- ❑ Calves: early weaning can occur between 80 and 120 days of age. Early weaned calves require a high quality diet or diet supplement to sustain adequate growth. You might consider creep feeding just prior to weaning to help calves make the transition. If possible, limit early weaning to only those calves that are readily eating forage and other feeds. Finally, limit other stressors on the calves before and after weaning by avoiding vaccinations, branding, castration and other activities until they have recovered from weaning stresses.
- ❑ Lambs and Kids: early weaning can occur as soon as 14 days of age, although most early weaning of lambs and meat goats takes place at 45 to 60 days of age. Lambs and kids should be drinking water and consuming adequate amounts of dry feed prior to being weaned. Creep feeding may help lambs and kids make this transition. Heavily lactating ewes and does may develop mastitis and should be observed carefully during the weaning process.

Conclusion

A successful drought strategy may allow you to focus limited resources (forage and stock water) on the breeding stock you wish to maintain based on carefully selected traits and performance criteria. Considering these criteria before a drought occurs is critical; destocking decisions made in haste can have devastating consequences. Be sure to consider the tax, cash flow and economic consequences of destocking, as well.

Sources

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