drought tips

Number 92-04

Drought Strategies for Feeding Beef Cattle and Sheep

Droughts are an unfortunate reality in California and will occur in the future just as they have in the past. Because no two droughts are the same, however, there is no one prescribed method for managing the feeding of beef cattle or sheep during a drought period.

The least-cost course of action may be a high grain diet. Barley, corn, milo, oats, and wheat are energy-rich feeds of comparable nutritive value for the purpose of drought feeding. They contain protein adequate to meet the requirements of most classes of livestock except young calves and lambs. Grains, however, are low in calcium, so a calcium source such as limestone should be fed with high grain diets.

Grain consumed to excess or introduced too rapidly can cause sickness and even death.

A change from one grain to another must be done carefully to prevent digestive disturbances. The change should be made gradually by mixing the old and new grain and substituting completely over a 7- to 14-day period.

All grains are more digestible for beef cattle if coarsely ground, although barley, oats, and wheat give satisfactory results when fed whole. There is no advantage to grinding grain for sheep.

Livestock must be introduced to high-grain diets gradually. Before introducing any grain at all, the stock should be fed on hay for several days so that they become filled up. Rations containing separate grain, roughage, and minerals can then be introduced in the proportions shown in table 1. See table 2 for the breakdown of the ingredients. Adequate hay should be fed and grain gradually increased according to the proportions given in table 2.

University of California Cooperative Extension livestock farm advisors can provide information on *Taurus*, a computer software program designed to formulate drought rations.

Table 1. Introducing a 1000-lb lactating cow to a high-grain diet

	Days 1-7	Days 8-14	Days 15-21	Days 22-28	Final
Grain/Limestone	30%	40%	50%	60%	74%
Alfalfa Hay	70%	60%	50%	40%	25%

During cold, wet, windy weather, increase the feeeding of hay by 20%.

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Table 2

Ingredient	*As fed basis lb/day*	%
Wheat	10.713	73.456
Alfalfa hay or equiv. pasture	3.859	26.460
Limestone	0.012	0.089
Total	14.585	
Cost ($/day)	.087	

Assumptions:
1. 1000 lb beef cow
   (a) milk production 10 lbs
   (b) 90 days pregnant
2. Alfalfa hay $120 portion
3. Wheat $120 per ton
4. Limestone $100 per ton

Amounts of alfalfa hay to be fed to the same cow would cost $1.27 per head per day (table 3).

Table 3

Ingredients	*As Fed Basis lb/day*
Alfalfa hay	22
Cost ($/day)	$1.27

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California Department of Water Resources — Water Conservation Office
University of California (UC)
UC Department of Land, Air and Water Resources
USDA Drought Response Office
USDA Soil Conservation Service
USDI Bureau of Reclamation, Mid-Pacific Region

Published 1993