

Survey of Ranchers Opinions on 7 Years of Drought in Montana:

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Introduction It seems like there is no end of the drought and it continues to drag on. In the February issue of Beef: Questions and Answers newsletter, I asked the following questions of the readership. Approximately 2500 surveys were sent to the readership and about 200 surveys were returned. The following table summarizes how ranchers have coped with seven years of drought. The survey emphasized management of the cow herd, the feed resources and the sources of water.

Summary of Ranchers Opinions:

Cow Herd Management

- Cow herd numbers have been reduced.
- Conception rates were not consistently reduced
- 50% of ranchers early weaned their calves
- Few cows were shipped out of state with retained ownership

Feed Resources

- The majority of ranchers purchased more hay than normal.
- The majority of ranchers grazed hay fields instead of normal haying operations
- Ranchers fed hay for a longer period of time than normal.

Water Resources

- 40% of ranchers were forced to haul stock water and
- 43% drilled new wells.
- Only 18% of ranchers have tested their stock water for sulfate levels and this should be done if there is a reduction in calf performance.

Table 1. Summary of Ranchers Opinions On Dealing with Drought in Montana

Cow Herd:	% Yes	% No
• Have you reduced your cow inventory	75	25
• Has the drought stress reduced your weaning weight	46	54
• Has the drought stress reduced your conception rates?	30	70
• Have you early weaned your calves?	50	50
• If you early weaned, at what age were calves weaned?	4-7 months	
• Have you kept fewer heifer calves for replacements?	60	40
• Did the cows go into the winter months in poorer body condition than normal?	31	69
• Did you ship cows out of state and retain ownership?	8	92
Feed Resources	% Yes	% No
• Did you lease extra grass for the cow herd?	51	49
• Did you purchase more hay than normal?	65	35
• Did you graze CRP pastures?	27	73
• Did you graze hay fields instead of normal haying operation?	64	36
• Did you feed hay for a longer period of time than normal?	74	26
• Did you feed any non-traditional feeds such as straw, wheat midds, corn gluten feed, distillers dried grains?	50	50
• Have you observed an increase in problem weed species in your pastures and rangelands (fringed sagewort, alyssium, etc.?)	65	35
• Will you change your weed management program?	49	51
• Has some of your perennial grass died due to the drought?	65	35
• Will you have to reseed pastures?	36	64
Water Resources	% Yes	% No
• Have you had to haul stock water?	40	60
• Have you drilled new wells?	43	57
• Have you installed a pivot or wheel line?	17	83
• If you had limited irrigation water, did you change management strategies to compensate?	49	51
• Have you tested your stock water for sulfate levels?	18	82

Final Question

Besides the lack of water, what is the biggest issue you have seen arise from the drought on your operation?

The greater cost of feeding---we have left replacement heifers in a feedlot longer than we usually would; we are considering selling the light end of the heifers this spring. * The fear of not knowing what to do next has effected the economy of Beaverhead County * The lack of forage for cattle...sell?...find pasture? And the long term effects of continued use of stressed forages * Reduced our ability to rotate pastures thru the summer months & water availability dictated rotation rather than grass management. * Overall health of the pastures has decreased leading to poorer condition of the cows & we have had to purchase additional feed for the cows while on pasture to keep the weight of the calves up. * Raising lack of feed stuffs and poor condition of pasture. * Decrease in herd size during this period of high prices. Over-grazing of pastures and range (W Crouch- call if you have questions) * Stress- people relationships suffer- cash flow suffers- more surveys to fill out. * Stress- it really gets you down after seeing brown all the time; looking for other work; keeping cows moved; feeding 9 months out of the year) * Damage to existing pastures, increase in weeds, such as halogeton. * I'm going to sell out *

Poorer range conditions especially around the water. Where there is no water range conditions are better. Lack of money from buying extra feed. * Cow #s have been reduced to level where it is not profitable to ranch no matter what prices are. * Increase of weeds in pasture * Possible long-term effects on grass; profitability is difficult because we have less pounds to sell, but costs are equal or higher than before * Coal bed methane development along with drought is an insane way to handle drought-depleted aquifers * Not enough grass, short grass & weeds on about 8 months of grass 10 cows per section . Increase in weeds & our seeded fields are beginning to lose plant density- may have to re-seed spring pastures * Pasture rotation to keep cattle on the move so we don't overgraze * More wildlife on our land *

Cost of maintenance & price of fuel/to compensate for calf & cow retail price * Long-term range conditions will affect profit levels from cattle income * More grasshoppers; stressed range plants will take some time to recover * Damage to desirable grasses & dryland alfalfa * Nothing grows except dust and weeds * Rethinking traditional thoughts- seeding grain ground to grass; develop more & larger H2O facilities (water 500 pair); short duration high-intensity grazing; graze wild hay meadows; calve later, calves start last of April; next year, start in May; go to grass range, quit haying * Fewer cow numbers & missing out on the good markets, finding good quality hay to buy & having to buy so much of it * Grasshoppers, stress on non-native grasses; we are in process of re-seeding old farm ground that was put in wheatgrass pasture and alfalfa; alfalfa stands next to cheat grass last 2 years * The lack of funds due to added expenses (drilling a well & buying feed); the lack of income due to not being able to keep replacement stock * It isn't much worse than NAFTA and the rest of gov. regulation * Increased work load to keep irrigated ground producing & managing to compensate for poor grass and water *

I will sell coming yearling heifers unless I find some grasses * Even with light grazing there is a continued degradation of native range * More BLM activity, less grass; mainly the stress it puts on a person wondering if it will ever rain * Having spring grazing * Lack of grass * Hay production * Higher stress & anxiety levels, more meddling in the operation by BLM, Dept St. Lands, etc., who all seem to have the answers, but really are quite ignorant * Pipe lines supply enough water; the biggest issue is lack of forage & an increase in club moss & cactus * Reduced carrying capacity of pastures * Decrease in desirable grass plants * Rising cost of everything else w/a smaller herd to pay for operation * Family stress * Long term possibility of damage to native grass if unwilling to lease outside grazing or buy extra hay to delay turnout if still grazing some numbers * Maintaining health summer pastures * The early onset of grass seed heads & then drying up- thus losing both volume & seeds due to cattle eating them; try to make the \$ stretch w/fewer cows and more bills * Lack of grass, grass dying out & buying hay * Put lot of money in feed, supplement rental pasture *

The environmental movement=rules & regs which are not based on solid science; taxes and high op costs plague us; we pray that the good prices for cattle hold; this will make or break ranching as we know it * Lack of grass and weeds coming into native range * With small cow numbers, rising cost to operate & added expense of digging wells, weed control & renting pasture; it has become a challenge to pay the bills * Cost of diesel * Lack of green forage; buy hay; supplement

heavily, lick tubs, minerals; Even CRP is very, very dry; not much help financially; devastating; if cattle prices fall I'm done for * Numbers of AUM's produced from all pasture & rangelands * Very little grass, therefore had to creep feed calves, plus selling calves 30 days sooner than normal * People of the land are depressed; the area has very little money; the 20-30 year olds have left the area & the state * Inconsistency in all areas (cattle, wheat, pasture, etc.); not knowing if we can graze; hay CRP, if there will be some assistance * Money *

Forest service has reduced grazing more than what is necessary to maintain range condition * Dusty corrals from weaning; wetlands drying up * Our costs are way up because we've had to buy more feed; our cattle numbers are down so even though calf prices are higher, our net is down- thank you for doing this * Conception levels of cows is approximately 5-10% lower; due to the drought & lack of grass, more mineral supplements are being used * No grass * Costs of supplemental forage, protein & other nutrients * Water rights disputes, increased bark beetle activity in timber * Cattle breeds on a whole are not adaptable to desert-like conditions; low maintenance cattle are what is needed & seed stock procedures are more interested in max performance (too much milk especially). * Loss of plant diversity, decline of range conditions, increase in weeds, mustard & knapweed showing up * Influx of game animals onto feed we have saved; this area of Meagher CO was not very dry in 2004 * Reduced grass production is the biggest issue *

To manage pastures so as not to hurt the grass stands * Lack of grass!!! Feed earlier & longer- about two months * Regrowth of grass during season * Extra cost for additional feeds (cake, wheat midds); forests are taking a beating from stress * Dealing with the grazing issues, with the forest permits and on our private land * Lack of water * The concern about this winter's snowpack; it looks very bad * The biggest issue is no money * More wildlife eating in may fields * Poor crop conditions, more weeds, extreme fire danger each weason reduced conception rates for sure * Price and availability of pasture * The extra stress it puts on pastures *Spend more time with the water and keep it moving and not let it run to waste * Range deterioration * Changes in feed stuff & winter management, w/fall & spring grazing grasses left & starting on summer range decreased over 50% on time & cattle * Increasing of cheat grass so more money is put in weed control, buying extra hay & pellets; it just costs more * Low tonnage & low quality hay; weavel & grasshopper destruction * Loss of production tonnage of grazing and hay * Weeds * No old grass to offset another forecasted dry 2005; continued

Wear and tear on equipment, hauling water 13 miles one way up to 2 or 3 trips/day in heat of summer; feed cost is horrible * Grow more hay bly-less wheat, we get less response to fert. application; we are getting cheat grass in alfalfa fields that; never had before have to spray roundup in spring- thanks for your dedication to the livestock industry *

Winter kill in our pastures & weeds * Dealing with farm programs & crop insurance regulations, rising input costs & time for a smaller number of cattle-net return per cow 0 * Lack of grass * Cranky neighbors, less optimistic; increased capital expenses * Shorter, thinner grass stands, increased deer & elk population, less hay, grazing hay meadows is risky * We live north & a little west of Rapelje- ground squirrels & prairie dogs are taking over; we have too many antelope & deer & the last year elk are getting thicker; grasshoppers are taking a great deal of the pastures; many of the evergreen & cotton-wood trees are dying * Great increase in trucking; we have moved cattle around & hauled several thousand tons of feed in since the drought began- this has increased the cost of operating a great deal *

Despite trying to reduce rangeland steers by cutting cow nos, the land still looks tough- I'm concerned about the long-term health on our range * Keeping the plant community healthy & alive through grazing management- dust pneumonia in calves! * The way insurance benefits are figured- the start was good, the last one was figured on crops that were starting on the downward spiral & not on the good crops in the past- If that is continued on that trend, it is programmed for failure; it looks like the returns on policy will not be worth the premium!! * Bare ground, wind erosion on range * It tends to slow or put on hold the implementation of plans; seems like extended drought puts one in a hang-on mood (SE Montana) * More elk damage as elk invade meadows as dry land grass becomes short- not just a little damage, lots! * The spread of unwanted weeds into the pasture land; not over-stocking grazing units *

I have been concerned about dust pneumonia from trailing & extremely dusty CRP hay, but so far I haven't had any, which surprises me * dust * Lots of pasture just NO GRASS * Longer time of supplementing- start in August * Increased

expense * Grasshoppers have done considerable damage the last 2 years * Costs of the extra feed & pasture, and stress of how to deal with it all * Irrigation water quality is poor due to coal bed methane discharges into the Tongue River * Reduced farm/ranch income * Debt has increased due to buying hay & leasing grass * Makes you tighten your belt & do a better job of management * Trying to keep from over grazing when you have no new growth * Controlling gophers (Richardson ground squirrel) & weeds so grass lands can be reseeded & rejuvenated * The loss of some native grasses & trees plus drought impact on antelope & deer * Family stress, constantly having to tend livestock & no or little help from USDA compared to grain subsidies * The unknown, long-term consequences on rangeland health due to extended periods of drought

1) requires more work from me 2) increases stress on me 3) too many "do-gooders" showing up in the press and in the politics and 4) too many producers expecting a handout * The drought has taken a lot of time & effort to keep the cow herd together; the drought has been a financial disaster- I should have sold cows immediately * Reduced forage production is #1; reduced recreation income from fishing- no fishing after mid July; deer recruitment down, elk distribution changed; dangers of fire have altered activities; our June calving herd was fed hay only one month in last 4 winters- an upside of dry winters * Deterioration of pasture, i.e. more weeds, less grass despite lower stocking rates and shorter grazing periods; willow trees 40 years or more old are dead & will never come back in my lifetime; the effects of the drought will take many years to overcome * Pasture performance

Stress on cattle, people, finances * Puts limits on what can do with livestock plus severe crunch on #s in this good market; positive is that we have looked at our whole livestock operation to see changes to make for more flexibility; also, looking to lease more pasture and never own so many cows- take in leased cows, run yearlings, etc. * The wildlife is lower and putting more pressure on range and hay * Increase in weeds and grasshoppers (they love the hot weather) and Forest Service permittee harassment due to decrease in spring flows; also, drought increases the stress of pine trees which increases dead tree numbers due to bugs killing the trees; now more fire danger; more stress! more stress! * Poor pasture and hay conditions * Increased cost-reduced income; just plain tough! * We have not had a good start for our grass in many years; every fall there is less plant matter to hold snow and prevent erosion *

The weeds that are in the fields and some spots where the grass has died out; we tend to not over graze our pastures so ours still looks better than some * We have to feed 3 lbs pellets every other day all summer * Last year was the first year we had an "all-out drought"; if it persists this year we will have to do another herd reduction; we cut back two years ago to conserve what grass we had; we are more fortunate than most of our neighbors, as we have a little grass and can graze CRP; they are overgrazed and out of grass; if we have to cut back, we will have trouble with cash flow at the bank * My operation depends mostly on leased grass- pasture is getting increasingly hard to find * We have been fortunate here in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains that what little moisture has fallen has been very timely * Aside from the obvious benefit of rain, it changes your attitudes- you can change your routine, livestock and people alike breath better and the list goes on! * Loss of water (we have the water rights) to upstream water thief- pending litigation (all my answers are based on 2003-2004) * *

We have a forest service lease of 8,000+ acres- they had us go in the forest a month later than usual in 2004 * I see light weight calves in the future due to dry conditions * I have always had a prairie dog problem, but since the drought began, the territory and extent of damage has drastically increased * Mostly no water, creating no grass; we cut back over half of our herd, grass still hasn't recovered (in 2003-04, cut back cow herd from 89 down to 25 cows) * Try to remain profitable with limited resources *

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