

Drought Preparedness and Response

STRATEGIES FOR FARMERS

BE PREPARED

Of all natural disasters, drought is the most gradual and hard to predict. Once it has affected crop growth, farmers and producers enter a new territory of what if's. What if it rains next week? What if it doesn't rain for a month? Alternative crops may have to be planted or crop loss assistance applied for. If feed supplies are low, herds may have to be culled and/or feeds purchased. For farmers who were already facing financial hardship, a drought can force major decisions about diversification, irrigation, surviving a major loss or even selling the farm.

The fact that Wisconsin suffered record droughts as recently as 1976-77 and 1988 underscores the fact that droughts are a natural occurrence. Fortunately, farmers can take some actions to better prepare for and survive a drought. The key is a combination of sound farmstead planning and sound decision-making, based on advice and up-to-date information from resources like your Cooperative Extension Service.

- ◆ *Examine your water use efficiency and irrigation needs.* If you already irrigate, contact your agricultural agent about using the Wisconsin Irrigation Scheduling Program (WISP). This research-based program assists growers in determining frequency and amounts of irrigation (if any) throughout the growing season; it can be extremely helpful during a drought. If you do not currently irrigate, consult with your agricultural agent and irrigation system dealers now — before a drought occurs. Emergency irrigation systems are difficult to put in place because of the permitting process (which may take 30 days or more) and possible lack of equipment mid-season (dealers generally sell equipment during the winter and spring). Look carefully at irrigation systems as a long-term investment.
- ◆ *Keep up-to-date forage inventories.* Accurate forage inventories in silos, hay mows and other storage areas help you determine feed supplies during a drought. Note the amount and accessibility of each lot of uniform quality forage. Your local feed representative or agricultural agent can assist you with this process.
- ◆ *Consider alternative on-farm related businesses (AOFRB).* Diversification can be a good long-term approach to revenue shortfalls from drought. Some potential businesses include:
 - a) Alternative crops such as shiitake mushrooms, ginseng, specialty vegetables, greenhouse plants, dried and/or cut flowers, etc.
 - b) Alternative livestock, such as llamas, ducks, bees, deer for venison or mink.
 - c) Forestry, including cord wood, maple syrup, apple orchards and Christmas trees.
 - d) Non-production farm-related ventures such as camping, fee hunting/shooting preserves, trout ponds, farm vacations, bed and breakfast establishments, summer camps on the farm, herd sitting, boat and camper storage, and farm markets.
 - e) Home-based enterprises including sewing projects, crafts, catering services, upholstery, secretarial service/word processing, taxidermy, etc.

Contact your Cooperative Extension office or your Small Business Development Center for more information.

AFTER A DROUGHT

◆ **Financial issues. Continue to pursue government drought assistance programs if you have not yet received relief; your county Extension office can help you through the application process. Also, see your accountant about tax issues related to the drought. If you received federal disaster payments, you may be able to postpone reporting them on your income taxes for a year. Likewise, if you sold livestock because of the drought, you may be able to postpone reporting gains on the sale for as long as two years afterward.**

◆ **Crop testing for feed. Nutritional values of crops are often affected by drought. Have fresh forage tested for high nitrate levels and nutritional value. Have oats and barley tested for nutritional value; nitrates usually are not a problem. Consult with your livestock nutritionist about corn quality and use. Test for mycotoxins in grain fields.**

◆ **Soil testing. Because of the potential for herbicide and fertilizer carryover, soil testing is very important following a drought year. See the fact sheets "Fertilizer Application After a Drought," and "Herbicide Concerns After a Drought Year," for test recommendations.**

Additional resources:

Your county agricultural agent

DURING A DROUGHT

- ◆ *Discuss financial and feed assistance in the early phase of a drought.* The earlier you enroll in feed assistance or financial assistance programs, the sooner you will be eligible for help. See your county agricultural agent about eligibility for grants, loans and other types of assistance. Likewise, contact your lender about potential problems before you are in over your head. You may be able to renegotiate current payment plans and establish an emergency plan if the drought persists and additional financing is needed.
- ◆ *Look to your county agricultural agent for up-to-date information on managing during a drought.* As part of a network of county, state and national research and field experts, your agent receives new information daily on managing during a drought. If your agent doesn't have the answer to your question, he or she can find the answer or refer you to the person for help.
- ◆ *Adjust fertilizer rates.* If you haven't already applied fertilizers, adjust your rates based on lower yield expectancy for the drought year. If little or no production is expected, consider skipping an application.
- ◆ *Be prepared to use mechanical weed control.* Many herbicides lose effectiveness during dry periods, making mechanical weed control your second line of defense against weeds.
- ◆ *Protect livestock from heat.* Adequate water, shade and ventilation in buildings are critical during hot, humid weather. Consider letting livestock out of buildings to cool them at night. Call a veterinarian if heat stress is a concern.
- ◆ *Consider alternative crops.* If your fields have less than 12 alfalfa plants per square foot or a 75 percent reduction in corn stand population, consider alternative forages. Some possibilities include sudangrass, sorghum-sudan hybrids, milage and millet. Corn silage might be the best forage alternative; even the worst fields have silage potential. Discuss possible options with your agricultural agent.
- ◆ *Cull unprofitable cattle.* If forage is inadequate, selling unprofitable livestock may be your next best move. Consider culling the bottom 5 to 15 percent. Review your options and the economics of the situation with Extension agents.
- ◆ *Recognize the early warning signs of emotional stress.* Stress can overwhelm farmers and their families. Some of the warning signs of severe stress include anxiety, depression, anger, violence and withdrawal. If you see these signs in yourself, a family member or friend, get outside assistance. Professional counselors, a clergy member or social worker can help, as well as the Farmers Assistance Hotline for Wisconsin at (800) 942-2474.