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Livestock Drought Concerns

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During this time of drought, the following are some general ideas on watering livestock:

- Not only will animals need more water because of the heat, plants are lacking moisture and there is less morning dew. This is most critical for dairy cows, less so for small ruminants.
- If rotational grazing, it may be more difficult to continue with good rotations. It is possible to strip graze and allow animals to come back to a central water source.
- Try to give paddocks a rest from animal activity by supplemental feeding and keeping animals off pastures. Consider use of sacrifice/heavy use areas. This will help reduce long term damage to grass stands.

If main water source dries up:

- Truck water to the animals. Fill poly tanks, barrels, old bulk tanks, whatever you might have and haul to pasture to fill stock tanks (use floats to fill automatically). You can get "fancy" with a water wagon using a large tank on a running gear. Place wagons under shade if possible; cows will choose shade rather than walk in the sun to water.
- Water them at the barn, bring back in the heat of the day and supplement feed, then turn out at night when their water needs will be lower. This will also help extend the pasture.
- Provide limited access to watercourse or pond if water quality is good. Pick a good site (hard approach & stream bed), using temporary wire to make access narrow (8' wide or less).
- Supplement with high moisture feed (baleage), which may help reduce the animals' demand
- Drill a well (expensive) or tap into an existing source (house/barn well) if possible. Make sure water source doesn't become overburdened.

Other concerns:

- Stagnant water and hot temps cause blue-green algae to grow. This algae produces toxins that affect both humans and animals. Water contaminated with blue-green algae will become cloudy, with a green, yellow or blue-green cast or hue. Take action to prevent algae from forming by cleaning troughs with household bleach, using a dilution of 1 part bleach to 10 parts water. Don't forget to clean the corners. Drain and rinse thoroughly.
- Be aware of nitrates in forages! Drought stressed plants, including grass, can be at risk for nitrate accumulation, especially immediately after a rain and where nitrogen has been fertilized heavily (this can include heavy manure applications). Try to avoid green feeding crops harvested right after a significant rain. Ensiling forages can help reduce nitrate levels, but not always. Forages can easily be tested for nitrate levels. Contact Cornell Cooperative Extension for more info.

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- Be aware that animals that do not have enough to eat from pasture can resort to eating weeds that they would not ordinarily eat, some of which can be toxic. These can include buttercup and milkweed, among others. Often times, these are the only green plants growing in drought stressed pastures. If you see these species growing and animals are grazing, supplement these animals while on pasture.

Bottom line: Animals need to have water. Do whatever you need to provide it!

Please contact Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County (607-865-6531) or the Watershed Agriculture Program (607-865-7090) with questions.



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