

Website, workshops help ranchers in time of drought

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LINCOLN—As drought continues to take hold of the state, managing drought on the range becomes ever more important.

Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch is a website at <http://drought.unl.edu/ranchplan> from the National Drought Mitigation Center that can help livestock producers get through the current drought and continue to manage their pastures when not in drought.

The NDMC developed the site in collaboration with University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension researchers Pat Reece (now owner of Prairie and Montane Enterprises), Jerry Volesky and Matt Stockton. The NDMC also consulted with ranchers, federal grazing experts and other researchers from UNL, South Dakota State University and Texas A&M University. The project was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency.

"The website has a number of things available to producers related to animal nutrition, etc., but the most important thing is that producers really do need to make adjustments in overall grazing plans and stocking rates," said Volesky, UNL Extension range and forest specialist. "With these drought conditions, we have seen pasture growth and production that is only 20 percent to 50 percent of normal."

On the positive side, in the last three to four years, the Sandhills and Panhandle have had good rainfall and there is a lot of previous years' grass left in pastures, he said. Unfortunately, the quality isn't very good.

Volesky said warm season grass started to grow, but it has stopped. So, using pastures overall is very important now through July.

"Once we get into August and September, it usually is inevitable that pastures are grazed heavier than we'd like."

The website is home to several resources for developing a ranch drought plan: assembling a

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planning team, identifying goals and objectives, inventorying resources, setting critical dates, developing a monitoring system, identifying strategies for preparing for and managing through drought, and implementing and evaluating the plan. Each step includes links to resources, tools and worksheets.

In addition, there are links to upcoming and past workshops related to managing drought archived on the site.

One upcoming workshop sponsored by the NDMC, Colorado State University Extension and University of Wyoming Extension is the Eastern Colorado 2012 Range and Drought Clinic July 31 in at the Burlington Community and Education Center in Burlington, Colo.

Another workshop at which the NDMC's drought team will be speaking is the annual Nebraska Grazing Conference. The team will speak the entire morning of Aug. 15 during the two-day conference in Kearney. Information about the workshops can be found on the Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch website.

The Managing Drought Risk on the Ranch website is designed to take users through the steps of developing a ranch drought plan. The "Inventory and Monitor," "Before Drought," "During Drought" and "After Drought" sections provide in-depth information and resources that will help users develop a drought plan.

"The primary focus is the plan," Volesky said. "Producers who have a plan already started putting their plans in place at the first signs of drought this past spring. For producers who don't have a good drought plan, this drought should stimulate them to start putting together a plan now."

In addition, the site includes a "Drought Basics" section, which provides in-depth information on climate and historical drought occurrence; the effects drought has on livestock, grasses and grazing management; geographic variability in precipitation and forage growth; and drought-related financial considerations.