

## Strategic Herd Reduction to Extend Limited Feed Resources

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During severe and prolonged drought, beef cattle producers have three basic choices for adjusting: purchase additional hay and/or feed, reduce cattle numbers or a combination of both. Locating additional feed can include buying hay, buying commercial feed, buying commodity feed, grazing crop residue, leasing more pasture or paying for custom grazing in locations with more forage. This article will focus on strategically reducing the number of cattle consuming limited hay and feed resources. Visit [UTBeef.com](http://UTBeef.com) or contact your local UT Extension Agent to find more information on stretching hay supplies and other drought coping strategies.

First, it is important to be decisive, confident and proactive when adapting to drought situations. Waiting to see if it will rain and pushing the decisions down the road usually results in more economic loss and a more stressful and difficult situation. The two most helpful approaches for being confident that early herd reduction is not a mistake are to accumulate the best science-based information that is available and to look at the situation as an opportunity to improve the core genetics of the herd. Even though the need to reduce herd numbers (especially in the face of a down market) is stressful, viewing it as an opportunity to weed out poor performers can provide confidence in future profitability and sustainability when environmental and market conditions improve.

Approach strategic culling to extend feed resources with your objectives in mind and make a list of priorities that each cow in the herd needs to meet for the herd to reach those objectives. For commercial production, efficiently producing pounds of saleable product (pounds of calf weaned per cow exposed) is the most likely production objective. After setting the objectives and priorities, systematically evaluate each animal in the herd to liquidate the least valuable animals first. Then, if there is still too much pressure on the available feed resources, marketing more valuable animals might be necessary. But, that can still be done strategically to retain the very best core genetics.

Consider the following criteria for strategically reducing herd size when forage, hay and feed are limited due to persistent drought. This can be thought of as an employee evaluation to determine the most productive workers in the group.

**Sell open cows:** A cow that will not calve in the next calving season is consuming profit every day. Pregnancy checking and marketing open cows is the most logical step for reducing pressure on limited feed resources. There are a few ways to accomplish pregnancy diagnosis. These include palpation, ultrasound and blood test. Decide on the best method for your situation and do it as quickly as that method allows.

This will also present the opportunity to move from year-round calving to a defined calving season. Or, if you already have a calving season, it can be an opportunity to make that season even tighter. Taking this opportunity now can lead to more efficiency and profitability in future years.

**Sell marketable calves:** For year-round calving herds, consider marketing calves that are old enough to wean. Removing older calves will free up the forage or feed they are consuming as well as the additional feed their dams are consuming to support late lactation. The revenue generated by selling older calves and open cows can be used to purchase additional hay or supplemental feed.

Herds with a defined calving season will have more flexibility to market the entire calf crop depending on when the reduction needs to occur. For the current drought situation, most spring born calves will have already been sold and the focus will be on culling less productive cows. However, hay and feed management for fall calving herds with relatively young calves heading into this winter will be more challenging.

**Sell poor producers:** This is another area of opportunity in the face of an otherwise stressful situation. If feed resources are still short after open cows have been removed from the herd, begin marketing cows that are bred but calve late or are marginal producers. Having records to identify cows that consistently wean a light or unthrifty calf is a great place to start. Also, cows with a history of producing calves that do not fit uniformly into the calf crop (ex. frame size, color, horned) could be marketed. Then, consider selling thin cows that will require more nutrients to increase body condition during the dry period to calve in ideal condition (at a body condition score of 5 to 6).

Give each cow an evaluation for indications that they will not last for several more years. Check the eyes for early stages of cancer eye and sell them before they are no longer marketable. Mouthing each cow to estimate age and their ability to graze effectively can help you decide if they will maintain productivity for several more years. Evaluate the feet and leg structure to make sure they will remain sound. Check the udder for blind quarters or teats that a newborn calf will not be able to nurse. Taking an opportunity to cull cows with poor disposition will improve both safety and overall herd performance.

**Consider early weaning:** Fall calving herds with limited hay or pasture resources should consider weaning calves earlier than normal to reduce the nutritional needs of the cow herd. Calves can be weaned as early as two months old but that is generally not practical for management or marketing. In this case, calves can be weaned at three to four months (as opposed to the normal 6-7 months) and still accomplish a reduction in nutritional needs for the mature cows while maintaining body condition to successfully calve and rebreed for the next production cycle.

Retaining the early weaned calves requires more intensive management and additional cash costs for feeding them. Early weaned calves will require a substantial amount of purchased feed to support growth. On the other hand, marketing early weaned calves reduces the overall pounds of calf weaned per cow and total revenue. Early weaning should be closely evaluated and the benefits weighed against the disadvantages. It is usually not a viable option for small and mid-sized commercial herds until feed resources are extremely limited and other herd reduction methods have been employed.

**Market replacement quality cows:** If feed resources will still be in short supply after going through the steps outlined above, some of the higher-quality cows might need to be liquidated. In that case, consider marketing them in areas that are not experiencing the same drought situation where they can be more valuable as replacements. Custom grazing arrangements (for cash or calf crop sharing) might be an option if the value of these cows warrants it and cattle producers with available forage or feed resources can be located.

Another opportunity that drought provides is to reconsider your overall approach to stocking density and grazing management. If drought situations are going to be more frequent and persistent, being more flexible by reducing the number of cow/calf pairs and adding a stockering component to the farm enterprise can be a good long-term strategy. In other words, use your calf crop as the “flex point” rather

than selling and restocking cows each time a drought occurs. In that case, fewer cows are maintained but calves are retained longer after weaning when grass (growing or stockpiled) is available. But, when drought limits forage availability, calves are sold soon after or at weaning to relieve stocking pressure without selling as many cows.