

# Do you have a drought plan?

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As beef producers you are often instructed to have a plan: a grazing plan, marketing plan, succession plan, nutrition plan – you name it, there’s probably a recommendation to plan for it. But have you ever thought of adding a drought plan to your list?

According to Brian Bledsoe, a Colorado weather meteorologist and frequent beef speaker, having a drought plan should be a high priority and in fact, he says you should’ve had one in place yesterday.

“To me, there is no worse thing in agriculture from a business perspective than drought,” Bledsoe says. “If you have a drought plan that you can enact to the T, you will get through times of drought. And you might not be as profitable as you like, but you won’t be selling the whole herd and selling your ranch either.”

Bledsoe points out that most ranchers already have deadlines built in their minds that lay out when they need to get moisture and they know if those deadlines aren’t met, they’re in trouble. But there is also another group – a more proactive group – that has those deadlines mapped out to where they say, “If we don’t see moisture by X date, then we will have to do Y.”

Bledsoe goes on to explain that if you know going into a particular year that it’s probably going to be dryer than normal, you can work your business around it so that you make money instead of lose money. He says it’s all about planning ahead, writing things down, and using weather to help your business.

“In my mind, the days of going out there and throwing seed on the ground, kicking dirt over the top and praying that it grows are over. If you’re still doing that, it’s not for me to judge, but I think you’re missing the boat. There are a lot of things that we are doing right now with weather forecasting that make it far superior to prior years and I think those in agriculture need to take advantage of that knowledge,” he says.

## A producer's perspective

Like many producers who have implemented a drought plan, Ted Alexander, a custom grazier in south central Kansas who has recently passed the business onto his son, says it has saved his business in more ways than one.

Not only did it help him in times of drought, but also more recently it helped him and his son, Brian, make some challenging decisions when the Anderson Creek Fire blazed through their property earlier this month.

“A wildfire may not be the same as a drought, but it presents the same set of incidents or circumstances,” Alexander says. “We have to be prepared to manage our forage differently than what we were doing before. So what we did with the drought plan is we reflected on the amount of rainfall we should've had and what was outlined in the plan – which said to destock 25 percent. So that's what we did. Some of that comes into delaying when we graze the cattle. We have specific dates outlined in the plan that indicate the amount of moisture we need and the stocking rate we should utilize based on the situation.”

## A word from the wise

In addition, Bledsoe issues a word of warning to the young and beginning producer. He says that the younger generation grew up in a time where drought was the anomaly rather than the norm. He believes the next generation has come to expect favorable conditions and if they don't have a plan, they will have a rude awakening when the moisture doesn't come.

“When these younger producers come into the business a lot of the time their inheriting a ranch or farm,” Bledsoe says. “If their predecessors didn't have a drought plan before, then they're really behind the eight ball because they haven't seen one crafted and executed. I think they need to be proactive about it because with commodity and land prices the way they are; if you mess up now the fallouts seem to be worse than ever before.”

Bledsoe also encourages producers to slow down when it comes to expansion. He says herd expansion is a good thing for those areas that are receiving adequate moisture. But he issues some cautionary words for areas like the western and southern plains that are likely to see dryer than normal conditions.

“Going forward specifically in the western high plains, the wetter times that we remember in the late 1970s through the 1990s, those things are over. Even little glimmers of hope here and there where we are wet, that isn't a return to those times. Our wetter times are shorter and less frequent, and our dryer times are longer and more frequent. So I encourage you to have a plan.”

**ILLUSTRATION:** A drought plan will prepare you for when the unthinkable arises. *Illustration by Kristen Phillips.*

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