

Past Season Drought Challenges Met By Graziers

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ROCKSPRING (Centre Co.) —

Graziers need to set aside some space to be used as a sacrifice area during a drought in order not to permanently damage pasture stands, according to several who spoke in August during Ag Progress Days.

According to Tom Calvert, formerly with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and a sheep producer from Greene County, producers need to ensure that plants are not hurt by overly grazing them, especially during a drought.

Calvert spoke on a panel with two other producers and an NRCS grassland management specialist at a graziers workshop next to the conservation resources technology tent during Ag Progress Days.

According to Duane E. Pysher, grassland management specialist with NRCS and moderator of the panel, some growers believe that a plant stores its carbohydrate energies in the root system. That's simply not true. Actually, the "storage reserves are above ground," noted Pysher. If the plant is too heavily grazed and is under stress (by cold or drought), very little energy is stored.

Overgrazing late in the season or during drought can readily hurt stands and impede plant growth the following season.

During drought, producers must maintain supplemental feed and change stocking rates accordingly, noted Larry Lohr, dairyman from Somerset County. That's where a combination of supplemental feed and a total mixed ration (TMR) system can be most helpful — and provide the flexibility needed when pasturing is not available.



Three producers spoke at a graziers workshop during Ag Progress Days. From left, Larry Lohr, Tom Calvert, and Woody Zook.

During the season, producers were hit hard all over the state by the fourth drought in seven years. The state declared a drought watch in several counties, particularly those in the southeastern part of Pennsylvania.

Woody Zook, beef producer from Chester County, used his experience from droughts in the late 1980s. He learned to maintain a sacrifice area and feed supplemental hay for a two-week period of time.

This year, like the droughts of the late 1980s, graziers were challenged with coming up with alternative ways to provide feed for cattle.

Lohr has been involved with intensive grazing systems on his farm for 12 years. He said he was reluctant to try out grazing on his farm, and went in with the expectation, he noted, that it wouldn't work.

At the time he was managing 40 cows. Where he expected the transition from conventional dairying to grass-based to take six months or more, he found it could be done readily — within six weeks. Now, Lohr milks 90-100 cows (with replacements, about a total of 150-200 head) on paddock sizes ranging from 1.1 to 1.5 acres. Overall, Lohr maintains 350-400 acres of land, including rented acreage.

Since the transition, he has saved money by grazing cows and seen health improvements for the herd. Lohr sees "a lot better situation with the feet and leg health . . . so many advantages to it you can't even count them all."

One challenge he faced was coming up with enough water for his cattle. He advised producers to select a large enough line with a big enough flow to

the paddocks.

Tom Calvert, a sheep producer from Greene County, said he has been "with sheep forever — born there, married there, lived on wife's home farm. Sheep have been my life."

Calvert maintains 65-120 ewes on 13 primary acres of intensively grazed pasture. Grazing has allowed him to lamb on pasture, benefitting health of the sheep overall.

Woody Zook, another panel member and a Chester County freezer beef producer, said that in 1980 he purchased the family farm and wanted to find some way to farm part-time. Zook began with an intensive grazing program that he has continued to this day. Now he maintains 32 acres in permanent pasture. He cares for 30 brood cows and 30 calves. Seven of the 32 acres are in some form of warm season grass.

Zook said, "we manage the grasses — the cattle do the grazing." The only equipment Zook uses are a tractor, mower, and a grain elevator.

Much of Zook's business involves direct marketing of the freezer beef. "I have not found any drawbacks to intensive grazing at all," Zook said. "It's a management tool, and we're still going through the learning curve."

Lohr, dairyman from Somerset County, uses a lot of different varieties and species on the pastures. The pastures are made up of 60 percent legumes and 40 percent grasses.

Zook uses different clovers and a bird's-foot trefoil/fescue combination. He also uses a clover variety called Southern Cross, a New Zealand red-type clover.

Lohr noted it is important to try varieties on small plots to see how they'll work on the farm. "Try experiments on your own farm and see what works for you, because it doesn't work everywhere," he said.

Zook said that any grazing system has to have flexibility in it. "You often don't know what plants will do and how fast they'll rebud," he said, so it's important to build a plan for times of drought.

Also, Zook noted that he clips a lot of his chicory pastures. He clips a seven-acre field twice a year.

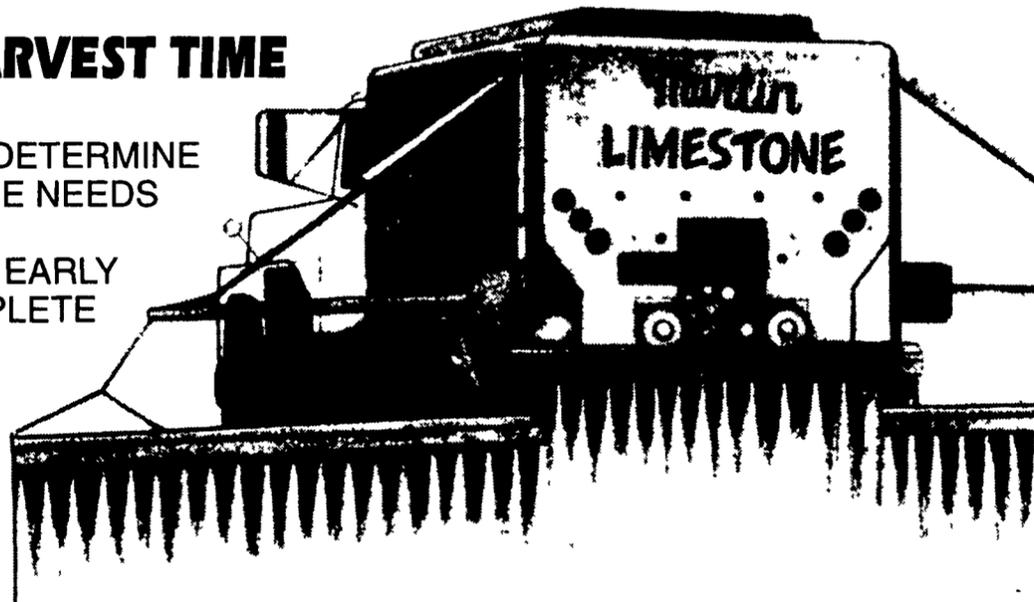
Calvert, sheep producer from Greene County, clips when he can get a chance to take care of weedy areas and for reseeding.

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