

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Surviving the Southeast's worst drought in 118 years

Most of the time, we in Tennessee spend part of every late June and early July weekend in a futile attempt to keep ahead of the green patch in the front and back of our houses we call a lawn. This year the lawn mowers are silent. We have not taken them out of the garage for weeks even though there are a few straggly blades of grass here and there that should be chopped off.

For us the freedom from the mower is a reprieve, but for farmers, and particularly livestock producers in Tennessee and other parts of the Southeast, the dry weather spells disaster. This region is in the midst off a drought of historic proportions. In the last 118 years of recordkeeping, this is the driest year on record. Rainfall has been below average every month of 2007. The problems that result from the drought are compounded by an Easter freeze that was followed by a second hard freeze ten days later.

Pastures that are usually green at this time of year are drying up and cattle producer are having to feed hay that they were saving for next winter. With dry fields farmers are experiencing skimpy hay cuttings and the prospect for corn stover and other crop residues are drying up as well.

In a typical year over a quarter of Tennessee's agricultural receipts come from beef and dairy production that is now under severe pressure as a result of the drought and the double late spring freeze. To help producers cope with these challenges the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation (TFBF) has brought together a number of university, state, and federal resources to identify potential problems that result from drought conditions as well as solutions for some problems and ways to prevent other problems.

The material developed by the TFBF includes a hay directory that identifies sources of

hay inside and outside Tennessee and the Southeast. This listing can be accessed on the internet at www.picktnproducts.org/farm/hay.html.

To draw attention to the plight of farmers, the TFBF arranged for Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander to visit drought stricken Loudon County to assess the impact of the lack of rain on both crops and livestock. An Associated Press article quotes Alexander as saying, "I want to make sure Tennesseans know about this double whammy that farmers in our state are suffering. So far as I can tell, we've never had anything quite like this."

The range of issues facing livestock producers include not only the shortage of hay, but the need to cull less productive cattle, the provision of adequate water, the development of nutrition programs in the absence of fresh grass, forage management, monitoring cattle for increased disease risk, nitrate poisoning concerns, and the presence of other poisonous plants.

To help with some of these issues the TFBF has drawn together a series of articles by University of Tennessee Extension faculty members: James Neal, Warren Gill, and Fred Hopkins. These articles as well as others that pertain to the drought can be accessed through the University of Tennessee Department of Animal Science on the internet at <http://animalscience.ag.utk.edu/beef/drought.htm>. The site contains about 40 articles that deal with various aspects of drought related issues in cattle.

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