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Watering Impacts from Drought

Maintaining a consistent *and safe* water supply for livestock is a big concern right now. Here are some considerations to go along with the strategizing.

When hauling water, use containers that have not been used for fertilizers or certain herbicides. Nitrogen can leach into the plastic fibers of tanks. Those nitrates will go directly into the water as it's hauled and then into the digestive system. Avoid compounding the current nitrate toxicity potential from forages with unsuitable tanks.

Rehabilitating old water wells is another opportunity to fill water shortages. Troubleshooting these wells is usually the largest obstacle to putting them back into production. Problems arise with wells from chemical incrustation, plugging by fine particles, and corrosion of well components, among other issues. Incrustation can be addressed with strong chemicals for dissolving materials, sometimes along with physical agitation. Proper well design and avoiding overuse is the main defense against plugging. To prevent component corrosion, use resistant casing and screening materials. Be sure to test the well water for total dissolved solids and minerals to confirm it is safe for consumption by livestock.

As evaporation and livestock continue to use up reserves in ponds, maintain vigilance on the health of the pond. On hot days with low humidity, water from ponds can evaporate quickly. Decreasing surface levels can lead to undrinkable or toxic water because the concentration of naturally occurring salts and minerals is magnified. At a minimum, this can result in decreased water consumption, reduced feed intake, and negatively impacting animal health. The cost of a basic water quality test is usually less than \$25. Even with compressed market prices, \$25 to protect an expensive animal is quite a deal.

Test water quality for total dissolved solids (TDS), sulfates and nitrates. High levels of sulfates can reduce copper availability in the diet, causing loose stools. Higher levels can induce central nervous system problems. Sulfate recommendations are less than 500 parts per million (ppm) for calves and less than 1000 ppm for adult cattle.

At concentrated levels, nitrates cause poisoning. Water sources are at risk of nitrate contamination if they receive runoff from fields or confined feeding operations. Water with extra nutrients is at a higher risk for blue-green algae blooms in periods of hot, dry weather. Some species of blue-green algae contain toxins and can be deadly. If a bloom is observed, livestock should be removed immediately, and a water sample taken.

Check water delivery systems periodically for proper function. New and impromptu systems have a way of wreaking havoc on a day's work. Make decisions based more on logic than emotion.

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