

## Drought Management

*Below are some drought management tips published from an interview with Charley Orchard. Writer John Maday, published a piece based on this information in Drovers Journal, October 2000 (www.drovers.com).*

Climatologists generally agree that the earth's weather patterns are in transition. Trends suggest warmer, drier weather for much of North America, and whether or not you experienced a drought this year, you will in the future. Now is the time to prepare by adjusting management practices and developing a plan for the eventuality of drought, and to avoid invasive weeds.

Management begins with planning, and planning begins with monitoring. Before land managers can make objective decisions based, for example, on current rainfall totals or soil moisture, they need a historical perspective.

We recommend several steps that land stewards, especially ranchers, can take to prepare for and respond to drought.

- \* Keep an accurate record of the amounts and date of moisture events and total them for each month. A thin layer of vegetable or mineral oil in a large coffee can help limit evaporation from the rain gauge.
- \* Develop a 12 month running total of precipitation. Some producers have enough historical data to predict Animal Days (ADs) or Animal Unit Months (AUMs) per inch of rainfall. This can be a powerful tool for planning.
- \* Monitor your land. Factors such as soil-surface crusting and litter incorporation provide feedback regarding your pastures' ability to effectively cycle water and nutrients.
- \* Strive to have the land looking as good coming out of the drought as it did going into it.



**A remarkable recovery:** the same area before and after instituting Land EKG land management strategies.

### Develop a drought plan

A good strategy is to develop a "critical rain date," by which your pastures need a determined amount of moisture to support herd numbers. Each ranch's particular location, climate and management practices determine the amount of rain needed and the critical date. Lack of critical

moisture by this date triggers the operation's drought plan. In dry years such as 2000, some managers used monitoring and grazing plans to predict forage shortfalls and were able to engage contingency plans months before many producers became alarmed.

**KEY:** It will never pay to drought feed your livestock.

### **Manage for Moisture**

- \* Develop a grazing plan to optimize plant growth and water retention.
- \* Keep the grazing periods in each pasture as short as possible. General rules of thumb are less than a week during the spring, less than 10 to 14 days in summer, and less than 21 days in the fall.
- \* Manage for soil cover and organic matter. Try to leave half or more of each year's residual aftermath at the end of the season.
- \* Try to allow each pasture to rest for at least half of the growing season.
- \* Try to avoid grazing the same pastures at the same time each year.