

Keeping cattle hydrated and healthy during a drought

Drought conditions can create two deadly dangers for your herd: water deprivation and water (salt) intoxication. Poor water quality will worsen these conditions.

Water deprivation

High temperatures combined with a lack of fresh water or green forage can lead to dehydration and death. During a drought, a poorly managed herd may lack access to enough fresh water to stay adequately hydrated.

To remain healthy in hot weather, a 1000-pound heifer may need to drink about 20 gallons each day. The lack of rain may also lead to far less forage growth. In normal years, green forage may provide some of the daily water requirements for a grazing cow. In drought years, forage becomes much drier and the amount of water available from forage is much less.

To avoid water deprivation, make it a daily priority to ensure water is readily available to your cattle. Check the pumps that draw water from your wells. Make certain your troughs and tanks contain water. If you use nipple waterers in your barns, be certain that they are working properly

When working your cattle, avoid holding them for long periods in pens that lack water sources and do not work them in the heat of the day.

Also, be sure your cattle know where to find their water. Cattle are creatures of habit. If their preferred tank or trough dries up, they may ignore other, distant watering points in their pasture. Show them where to find water.

When you introduce cattle to new pastures, drive them to the troughs or tanks. Make sure your weaned calves know where to find water. Watch your cattle to make sure your cattle are drinking adequately.



Water (salt) intoxication

When cattle become excessively dehydrated, sodium levels will increase in all tissues, including the brain. If dehydrated cattle find water and drink too much too quickly, the liquid will rush to their brains. As the pressure builds in their brains, the cattle may develop instability or seizures, or may die. This is known as water (salt) intoxication.

Salt intoxication does not mean the animal is getting an excessive load of salt, but rather the sodium concentration is increasing in the body because the animal is deprived of adequate water.

If your cattle become dehydrated, they need to drink water immediately – but only in small amounts. If the trough is empty, put a few inches of water in the bottom.

Let all of your cattle drink at once to create competition for the water. Then repeat several times with about 30 minutes between each watering until their thirst is satisfied. This helps to assure that they all get enough water without drinking too quickly. Monitor their water intake. Keep it gradual.

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Poor water quality

Hot summer days take their toll on ponds and tanks. As water sources dwindle during a drought, the water may become concentrated with salt and other inorganic materials.

Unpalatable water may cause cattle to avoid troughs or tanks, leading to deprivation and dehydration.

Test your water for high concentrations of sodium, calcium, nitrates, magnesium salts and sulfates. If concentrations are high, you will need to find new sources of fresh water.

Warm stagnant water may also encourage the growth of blue-green algae, some of which are toxic. The algae often concentrate on the downwind side of a pond.

If you find dead rodents, birds or fish along the downwind side, it may indicate the presence of blue-green algae that could harm your cattle.

However, you may find no dead wildlife to provide you with clues to the danger. The first indication could be one or more dead cattle.

Even during a drought, toxic weeds may thrive along the edges of a water source. Look along the shorelines of tanks and ponds for toxic weeds, like small headed sneezeweed or knotweed. You should control your livestock's grazing to avoid toxic weeds.

Have questions about toxic threats that may exist around your farm or ranch?
Contact TVMDL's Toxicology Section at 888.646.5623.