

2022 Spring Update on Drought Tips for Sheep and Goat Producers

Brent Roeder, MSU Extension Sheep and Wool Specialist

Dr. Chris Posbergh, MSU Sheep Teaching and Research Professor



The current drought showed up in Montana in June of 2020 and spread statewide in the spring and summer of 2021. While the forecast for March 2022 is for near normal precipitation, especially for the western half of Montana, the long-range forecast is calling for continued below average precipitation from May through September of 2022. Currently over 70% of the United States is in some form of drought, so it is not just us. One bright note is the Montana mountain snowpack is between 80 and 100% of normal water equivalent. If this trend holds, we should have some water for irrigation. But, like an old-timer once told me, “If you’re irrigating without rain, you’re just washing dirt.”

Most producers are banking on both lambs and kids maintaining their historic price levels through summer and fall. Accordingly, the stock I have seen this winter is in excellent shape and lambing and kidding should progress well. I am more concerned about having adequate pasture conditions moving into late spring and summer to keep those lambs and kids gaining well. With the forecasted drier conditions, shortage of hay and increased grasshopper pressure across the whole state, maintaining condition to milk well could be a struggle.

Several range scientists and Extension specialists summarized drought impacts on range forage production and discussed the critical need to set target dates in an excellent article last year in *Rangeland Ecology and Management*. In Montana, where grass production is dominated by cool season grasses, 75% of total grass production occurs by early June and 90% by July 1 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rama.2019.09.005>). This highlights the importance of April/May precipitation. If we don’t get appreciable precipitation by Memorial Day, producers need to have a firm plan to deal with pasture management and what they will do with their livestock.

In Montana, we can basically break sheep and goat grazing management into two types: 1) Irrigated/Improved Pastures and 2) Rangeland. These grazing types have different challenges and opportunities during drought.

- 1) Irrigated/Improved Pastures: We generally run a higher stocking rate and have a higher rate of forage utilization. We generally do not have to worry about livestock water. Challenges this season will be: 1) the massive increase in the cost of fertilizer, 2) possible increase in parasites like barber pole worm due to lower grass height, more frequent watering and higher grass utilization levels and 3) lack of late season water. Under drought conditions on these pastures, it is generally better to wean lambs or kids early at around 60 days of age; keep the lambs and kids on green feed until they hit an acceptable market weight; and dry lot the ewes and does on straw and lower quality leftover hay. Why not the other way around? Basically, those ewes or does will inhale the limited grass you have and in short order you will have everything on full feed. Hopefully, producers can get enough grass growth after lambs and kids are shipped to turn ewes back out on pasture in late summer. Monitor grasshopper levels. A good mineral package is needed from lambing and kidding through the summer. Watch parasite loads on lambs and kids on pasture. Night penning the lambs and kids and creep-feeding them is also a good plan to get them to market weight as

fast as possible and reduce predation losses. Yes, this costs money, but lambs are selling for close to \$3 per pound and kids around \$4 per pound.

- 2) Rangeland: Hopefully producers stopped grazing last fall when we reached the target levels of 70-80% utilization, two-inch stubble height or 50% bare ground levels. This should have prevented any long-term damage to your range resource. Major issues on rangeland this year could be 1) lack of livestock surface water, 2) quality of that water, 3) consumption of poisonous plants, 4) grasshopper pressure and 5) grass tetany. In a normal year we would graze our non-native pastures like Crested Wheatgrass first and rest our native range as long as possible. Talking with producers and county agents over the winter, we have many areas of the state that currently have no surface water source in many pastures. Drillers are overwhelmed, so you may want to consider using pastures with limited spring or surface water first if it is available, and saving pastures with more reliable water sources for later in the summer. Hauling water on a large scale is very expensive and time consuming. Many county Extension offices now or will soon have the ability to test livestock water samples in office. As summer progresses and water quality deteriorates, take advantage of this service and also their ability to test standing hay for nitrates before you cut. As we fed huge quantities of out-of-state hay over the winter, be on the lookout for any new weeds. Dry springs tend to limit grass growth and favor normally unpalatable poisonous plant growth. Range Plants of Montana EB0122 (https://store.msuextension.org/Products/Range-Plants-of-Montana_EB0122.aspx) is available for purchase through the MSU Extension online store. For \$10, it is a great resource to identify potential problem plants. Monitor grasshopper pressure moving into spring and work with your county Extension agent to develop a treatment plan in case you reach an action threshold. Keep all livestock on a good mineral program to prevent grass tetany (<https://animalrangeextension.montana.edu/range/grazing-management/gm-grazing-alert.html>). For producers grazing rangeland, it generally works better to early wean lambs or kids and feed them in a dry-lot pen to maximize gains and reduce predation losses while running dry ewes and does on whatever pasture is left.

Doug Avery, a New Zealand sheep farmer who has dealt with drought and depression, wrote his observations in a great book titled “Resilient Farmer.” He reminds everyone to keep the top paddock healthy – meaning maintaining your sanity during a drought is key to ensuring the success of your operation. Droughts are very stressful on many fronts and self-medicating with alcohol may help for a bit, but it is not the long-term answer. Do not isolate; everyone is struggling, so seek professional help if suggested. Helping others is the path to helping yourself, so volunteer with a youth program or organize a group to fix up local country school or church. You can also redesign the lambing/kidding or shearing barn or work on home improvements you have put off for years. Doug specifically recommends a weekly meeting with friends who are not actively ranching, so you have something to take your mind off the drought. Also, there are lots of off-ranch jobs currently available to help with cash flow. Off-ranch income also provides an opportunity to do something other than watch dust blow. You can always go back to full-time ranching when it rains. Stay positive, stay active mentally and physically, look for opportunities and work on plans for what you will do when it



rains again. Take some time off and travel. The whole world is not in a drought even if your whole ranch is. As Cody Jinks says, do not “curse the sky.” Keep the faith, but remember it rains on the just and unjust alike. It will rain again.