

Managing a Drought

—Ulf Kintzel

*In a dry year you worry to death.
In a wet year you starve to death.*
(Dutch proverb)

Photos by Author

The Germans have a similar saying, less poetic and a bit graver: “Fear the wet years, not the dry ones.” Either way, these proverbs always carry a lot of truth and I can confirm that both are true for me as a sheep farmer and shepherd. The headline could also have been saying “Surviving a drought.” That is how it felt most of the time. “Managing” it gave me at least the perception of being in charge of some of it. During the drought, I surely worried. A lot. In the ten years that we are here in upstate New York it had never been this dry. I asked old-timers if they recall it being this dry. One said early fifties, another said 1964. In any event, it had been a while since it was last this dry. In addition to the dry weather, we had many hot days with temperatures above 90°. It was also windy at times when we had this heat, which dried the ground out even quicker.

The pastures quickly went from green to brown. In early June, the dry weather caused a lower yield in hay, but all the first-cutting hay was baled without any or little risk of rain. In mid-June, although we already had a deficit of rain, everything was still green but it didn’t grow much anymore. By late June I was grazing the re-growth of the hay fields that I had wanted to mow again for second-cutting hay. By mid-July everything was brown, the grass was gone, and I had started buying and feeding hay. However, on July 18 we received almost an inch

of rain. While it did not create significant growth, for we had too much of a water deficit, it did make some spots green up a little. To my surprise, the sheep found enough to fill their bellies. The hay was pretty much left untouched. While the dry weather and heat continued, it did rain occasionally just a little. It was just enough to make it green up a little so that the sheep found enough to eat. To my surprise, the market lambs kept growing seemingly at the same rate as always. While I should have known that lambs grow well when it is dry since the grass is more nutrient-dense, I was still surprised, given the very dry conditions. I made sure the sheep had plenty of shade, water, and large portions to graze.

In mid-August I seemed to get some relief. One of my neighbors stopped by and showed me a letter from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) that allowed for emergency haying and grazing on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land. For those who are not familiar with CRP, a short explanation is that these are fields that are left fallow in order to reduce soil erosion and the farmers get paid for not farming them. Although they are mostly weedy fields, I figured that grazing tall weeds beats both feeding hay and grazing on my own fields with not much left to graze. However, I was cautious. I had been through this before with another neighbor’s CRP fields that I was allowed to graze during the 2007 drought. I remembered clearly that the letter had also arrived this late





Now you see them, now you don't. Grazing a CRP field.

and although I had the required paperwork filled out without any delay, there was quite some delay on the other end. By the time everything was approved, only a few days of grazing were left until the end of the permitted grazing period. Back then I had enough New Jersey left in me that I had a fit with the person in charge. Of course, it didn't change anything.

This year I expected the same early end of permitted grazing and was willing to shrug it off. Upstate New York is that kind to you; you get calmer. Age does some of it too. Sure enough, the grazing period was to end at the end of August. Since I was almost ready to embark on our annual week of family vacation, I knew I would not be able to pasture, not even for a few days. Why was the grazing period to end August 31? I was told because of the birds. Those who know me also know I am a big fan of birds. And I don't just mean being a fan of roasted chicken. I asked the FSA official, "What about the birds?" I pointed out they were on their way down south. No logical explanation followed. I let it go because I realized that the person on the other end didn't set the rules. So I thanked her and ended the conversation. To my surprise, she called the landowner back and told him that they would allow me to graze until September 30. While that too was an arbitrary date, this time I didn't ask for the logic. I took it. Upon my return from vacation I went ahead and mowed paths in these fields with high weeds to set up my electric fencing. Then I walked the flock down the road to these fields. My herding dogs make this possible. There were 30 acres of CRP fields and in addition a 13-acre hayfield that gets hayed only once in the summer and which I pasture every year in the fall anyway.

The picture of the CRP field shows you the number of tall weeds, particularly goldenrod. It was accompanied by tartarian honeysuckle, mature orchard and broom grass, tall fescue, and many shrubs and plants that I was not able to

identify or didn't attempt to identify because the sheep and goats ate them anyway. There was also a considerable amount of poison ivy in some spots, which was eaten too. Each day I grazed there, the sheep seemed satisfied and full. What about the goats? Well, they probably felt like heaven since all the shrubs and hedgerows were a delight for them. I wasn't worried about them. The question I now had was how the feed value of these CRP fields was and how my remaining market lambs would grow. Seventeen days into grazing these fields, the moment of truth came. I sorted out twenty-some market lambs that I needed to harvest and weighed them. (Note to myself: wear a long-sleeved shirt the next time you weigh lambs that have been grazing poison ivy.) They had been weighed just prior to grazing the CRP fields when I was still at the home farm. The result was that there was no discernible difference in daily gains of weight. What a relief.

All in all, I spent three weeks in these 30 acres of CRP fields and an additional eight days on the adjacent 13 acres of hay. I was able to stay away for almost the entire month of September. So, what is my point of spending so much time on describing my time at these CRP fields? First, a friend of mine was asking me to include this. He appreciated the outside-the-box thinking and stated he wanted to see it in this article. (Here it is, Nathan.) Secondly, I said to myself at the onset of the drought that not all was bad and likely something will be learned from this. I will say more about this in my summary, but as far as the CRP fields are concerned, I learned that my sheep did very well on them, gained weight, and were full and satisfied every day. Perhaps next time a drought comes around I could be a little bit more proactive and inquire about grazing ahead of time, knowing that their deadline for grazing is not set in stone, lining up these fields ahead of time as there are more around in the area. Moreover, the time spent away from home allowed my pasture to put some reserves in its roots. It



On the way to the CRP fields. My herding dog makes it possible.

didn't grow all that much since the dry weather continued until the end of September with only one rain event worth mentioning during that entire time, amounting to just over an inch of rain. Yet, the rest must have done it some good.

As the drought continued in September, so did my worries. I remember the many times I stood in the pasture, having an almost unobstructed view to the west and seeing the rain clouds, followed by seeing those clouds split and the thunderstorms passing me a mile south and a mile north. It was frustrating. One thing that helped me during that time is how little of a problem such a drought actually is. When you follow the news coming out of places like Syria or Iraq, you know things could be far worse and that a little drought is nothing in comparison. Living in upstate New York, you also knew the drought will end. Upstate New York isn't California. Rains will come and even the day will come when we will say, "It can stop raining now." That day came at the end of October after one rain event amounting to five and a half inches, and some additional rains, amounting to a total of almost eight inches overall that month. The rain continued at the beginning of November with another one-inch rain. Each rain event in October was followed by a warm and dry week that made the grass grow. The first two-thirds of November were spectacular. It was warm, so warm that the grass still grew a little in early November. My grass, and especially my white clover, grew rapidly throughout the month of October, almost spring-like. I said, "Hello, white clover, I haven't seen

you all summer; didn't know you were still here."

No, seriously, I didn't know if the white clover was still there or if I had hurt it by grazing so close. It is hard, almost impossible, to leave a lot of residual on any white clover, let alone when it is so dry. As you can see clearly in the picture taken in early November, my pasture had fully recovered. I had trusted the recovery of my healthy pasture. However, I thought in the summer and early fall I would have had to wait until next spring to see it.

In mid-October, I caught another lucky break. At the neighbor's farm, where I usually graze for several weeks in October and November for a daily fee, the rains had helped the hayfields to regrow, but in many cases not enough to be hayed anymore. I grazed there for five weeks. Daily gains of my remaining market lambs spiked during that time. Since I also put the rams in at that time, I expect a good lamb crop in the spring of 2017 as well. I left for my own farm when deer hunting season started. That is when I want to be at home anyway. It is safer. I intend to go back for another week or ten days after hunting season slows since I couldn't finish grazing all that was made available to me. Here at the home farm I should have another five to six weeks of grazing. Where does that put me? Into the beginning of January, even mid-January if the weather holds and we don't get snowed in. That will be the same time period of grazing as any year.

So, what did I learn from all this? Pasture is far more nutrient-dense when it is dry versus high in moisture. While I knew that, this drought made it sink in like no other event or

experience before. Green and lush pasture, grown with excess amounts of rain, which certainly looks good, can have one problem. The sheep fill their bellies but they fill it with too much water. You won't have that problem with drier pasture.

Whatever water is missing, the sheep will drink. And drink they did. At the height of the drought I was hauling water in my 320-gallon tank on a daily basis. I am fortunate that one can buy public water "downtown" in Rushville, where I live. You drive under a hose at the water station and put your money into the slot and in no time your

tank is full. The 320 gallons cost me just \$1.75 at that time. Sure, it adds up, but it still beats running your own well dry (as many did, including my neighbor) or having to drill another well (as some had to do). What I also knew before and what also sank in like no other time before, is that the internal parasite pressure is less. I only dewormed the remaining market lambs and some young ewes and ewe lambs with signs of worms once during the summer in late September, the first since spring, when they showed some signs of the barber pole worm sometime after one rain event. Coccidiosis was hardly present, if present at all. In a wetter year, I almost always battle some coccidiosis during the summer and early fall in younger animals.

I learned that my worry about what I would lose was in no way comparable to what my actual loss was. At the height of the drought, I wasn't sure if I would be able to finish my lambs. I worried that I would have to sell them off earlier. In hindsight, these worries are feeling almost embarrassing after the drought has ended. Such an excitement over three or four months of drought? I am sure there is someone in California who shakes his or her head about that. What is my actual damage? I will need to buy additional second-cutting hay, probably at a much higher price than usual. I take this in stride, since purchased hay also means additional fertilizer for my pasture. Besides, there is a livestock forage disaster program that hands out some money to those who were affected and applied for disaster relief money.

In addition, I learned that my own pasture, no matter how little there seems to be, is more desirable to my sheep than most hay that can be bought and that the sheep will prefer this pasture until there is absolutely nothing left. Furthermore, I learned that my pasture lasts longer than I anticipated. Anytime when I predicted another two or three weeks of grazing and then I would be out of grass, I found that I have



My pasture at the beginning of November: In a little more than a month it had seemingly recovered.

a little more left here and there. I was wrong several times with my estimation. Each time I was glad I was wrong. I also learned that my pasture has an enormous ability to recover rapidly when conditions are favorable again. When conditions are normal,

I don't cut corners. I leave plenty of residual, have a long enough rotational schedule, and avoid letting the sheep get a second bite when grazing. All that pays off when I face an extreme situation and have to cut corners. Pasture under these circumstances is very forgiving.

Lastly, I learned once again that extraordinary

circumstances lead me to extraordinary thinking and action. I had faced that on a larger scale when I lived in East Germany and the wall came down and with it the entire system, including my job. I didn't miss a beat then to take my destiny in my own hands. The use of the CRP fields is another such example on a smaller scale. Their use also taught me about the feed value of plants that we consider weeds. I had pastured fields with goldenrod before, but at that time I didn't depend on them. Now that I did, I recognized how high their feed value is.

After all this has been said and done, I am looking forward to more rain next grazing season. I don't want to write this article again next year. I hope I won't regret my wishes. Remember, a wet year is worse than a dry one.... 🐑

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