

What steps are you going to take if fertilizer prices continue to rise? What is your plan of action if we do not receive rain in the next few months? This week we will provide some suggestions to help you answer these questions. We will also stress the importance of thinking ahead and making plans in order to help cattle producers prepare for various scenarios they may face. Each cattle operation is different, and no circumstance is identical from one ranch to the next. Because of this, we will offer a variety of recommendations for you to think about so that you can assess your own operation, and decide which, if any, of the options we suggest will best fit your operation.

If you are concerned about the stability of fertilizer prices in the coming months, stocking rate should be in the forefront of your mind. Keeping a close watch on the quantity of forage available in your pastures is a great way to maintain a conservative stocking rate. If quantity of forages is low, destocking should occur so that adequate stocking rate is not exceeded and pastures are not stressed from overstocking. Stocking rate has as much of an impact on cattle as it does on the pasture itself. When stocking rate is adequate, cattle are receiving the amount of forage they need for maintenance. If stocking rate is not properly maintained, cattle may lose body condition, which negatively impacts the productivity of the cow. A mineral supplement should be provided at all times to help the cows maintain body condition and remain functional.

An additional way to keep pastures healthy without the use of a fertilizer is to implement a strong weed control program. A proper weed control on a pasture is as, if not *more* important than fertilizer. We will discuss benefits of controlling weeds, and various methods to do so at a later date. Chicken litter may also be a good alternative to using synthetic fertilizers, as it increases the amount of organic matter that is returned to the soil.

Another question a producer should ask himself is “What are the current forages on the ranch, and can/should this change?” If “Yes”, an appropriate follow up question is “Which forages are nutritious, but do not require as much fertilizer as the current forages that are being utilized?” Because clover does not require fertilization, we feel that introduction of this forage into your pastures may prove to be very beneficial. Tifton 85 is another drought tolerant forage that is more palatable and nutritious from late summer to fall compared to coastal Bermuda grass. Although we mentioned only a few, there are other drought friendly forages available. These forages will likely be more economical for a producer as they do not require as much fertilizer or rainfall as some other forages.

Soil pH should be tested before applying fertilizer to pastures. A pH above 6.0 is necessary for sustainable clover pastures. Soil testing and application of adequate lime are very important keys to land and forage management. Results from soil tests will help the producer determine if fertilizer is needed, and if so, what type and how much should be used.

Please note that we are not necessarily suggesting that all of these things be done if it does not rain, or if fertilizer prices rise. These are simply a variety of options to look at. Assess your operation and consult with us to determine the management steps that we believe will help you become a more profitable cattle producer.

The 50th annual Henderson County Farm and Ranch Tour is Tuesday, May 21 at 8:30am at the Henderson County Regional Fair Park Complex. The Henderson County Wildlife Committee is putting on a Lake and Pond Field Day May 23 at the Texan RV Park at 5:30pm. For more information about either of these events, contact the Henderson County Extension Office at (903)675-6130.