

Cattleman Brad Bader deals with effects of drought in southern Wisconsin

By PEGGY COFFEEN
DAIRY/LIVESTOCK EDITOR

After months of kicking the dust and cursing the sun, cattlemen in areas of the state most severely impacted by the summer's drought are ready to dance in the few spotty rain showers that come their way. Though it may be enough to settle the dust on the surface, producers' concerns for what is yet to come trickle down much deeper.

Carrousel Farms, owned by Brad, Randy and Troy Bader, has certainly felt the heat – not only from the scorching series of 90-degree days that plagued their southern Wisconsin cow-calf operation – but also from the pressure to harvest and locate enough feed for their 700-cow herd.

"We are in a severe drought area," states Brad Bader of Monroe. "Feed conditions are extremely tight."

In a typical year, they are able to sell the excess hay from their operation, which also includes 10,000 acres, a custom forage harvesting division and an excavating division. He also normally keeps a year's worth of hay on hand.

This year, however, the tables were turned. By the end of August, Bader's inventory harvested from their regular hay fields had already been fed, and he started buying hay as early as June. At this time, he believes he will have enough to take him through the spring until he can turn the cows and their calves out on pasture in May.

He purchased some high quality square bales and baled up set-aside fields. While the higher quality alfalfa grass hay tested at around 17 percent protein, the set-aside hay ran 6 percent. By blending the two together, he plans to stretch the supply. To make sure the cows and the calves they are carrying now are receiving adequate nutrients, Bader has supplemented the marginal hay with protein tubs.

As grazing opportunities dwindled this summer, they resorted to hauling hay out to the cows on pasture as early as July. In a typical year, Bader would not start feeding hay until November. Essentially, this means that he is using two years worth of hay for one year of feeding. "I hope we don't have to go through this again," Bader says. "I don't know if there's enough hay in this country to go through two years of this."

Corn silage is another important part of the cow ration at Carrousel Farms. Fortunately for Bader, much of his corn for silage was planted in lower lying fields that retained the limited precipitation better than higher ground. By blending the two together, he believes he will have descent quality feed. Thus far, nitrates have not been a concern.

Bader is also concerned about the availability of pasture, grass and hay for next year as we head into winter with little moisture in the ground. "The quality of pasture is already being affected for next year," he states. They attempted to reseed

dead spots in their pastures during the summer, but the heat and dryness were too much to support the growth of a healthy stand. With as much as 1,000 acres of pasture, this normally supplies much of the forage he needs. "That would be an awful big feed bill if I didn't have that grass," he notes.

Throughout the summer, Bader moved cattle from pasture to pasture to provide both feed and water. "A lot of our springs and two creeks dried up," he states, prompting them to put in wells, haul water and run hoses to make up for the lack of the resource. "We have not had to lower any of our wells yet, but a lot of people in our area have," he notes.

These circumstances pushed Bader to wean his calves earlier than normal. Though he notes that they are about 50 to 70 pounds lighter than most years, they are doing quite well. "We pretty much pamper our calves any year," he points out. He supplemented them with creep feed, particularly oats. In addition, his routine calf practices paid off during times of stress.

"We are in the business of beef, and when you want to sell a product, the healthier the better," he states. "The healthier the calf, the more valuable it is."

One calf protocol that Bader adapted more than a decade ago is administering First Defense paste at birth to prevent scours. By preventing sickness and setbacks at a young age, he feels that his calves were

better able to deal with the stress that came later with the hot, dry summer.

In early September, Carrousel Farms hosted their annual club calf sale. Around 70 calves sold to buyers from across the country, most of which will become 4-H and FFA project animals. "Even during drought conditions, it was the best sale we have ever had," Bader says. "I contribute that to good genetics and good health."

So far, things are in good shape for next year's calving season. A recent check on 300 cows showed a pregnancy rate of 90 percent. Bader attributes this to the adaptations they had made during breeding. "When AI-breeding cows, we tried to breed early in the morning and late at night," he says. "We also quit AI breeding a week early to give the cows an extra week with the bulls."

Only time will tell how Bader and other producers hard hit by the drought will come out. Right now, he says that cattle prices at the local sale barn are still holding their own, but that could change. "I know a couple of other farms that will keep their cattle until they run out of feed," he states, "Come January, February and March, we will see that."

Another dry spell into next year could be even more devastating. "The last drought I went through was 1988, and this was a lot more severe than that," he adds. "Two years of this, and there will be a lot of cows for sale."