

Water Worries for 2013 and Beyond

"Water, water, every where, Nor any drop to drink." During the past two years, most farmers and ranchers around the state can relate to the second line of this poem but probably not the first in this much quoted segment of the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. And pretty much everybody today is concerned about what to expect for 2013.

Water supplies in terms of both quantity and quality have become a major concern for rural folks, especially livestock producers, as well as city dwellers. Heavy siltation in ponds, water rationing, toxic blue-green algae, and hauling livestock water are just a few of the issues raised by the ongoing drought. So how does one deal with current conditions and prepare for the next drought in future years?

The lack of water is a known part of drought conditions but why do the ponds have so much silt that limits water supply for livestock and creates water quality issues like blue-green algae? Several factors can be considered in dealing with the current situation and conditions that are yet to come.

While many ponds are dry or so shallow to make them unfit for livestock access, others still provide usable supplies. As native bluestem pastures have gone dormant, those with suitable water can be grazed without damage to the grasses with some limitations. Enough forage should be left at the end of grazing to protect the grass crowns from severe freezing and the soil from frost heaving in the late winter. Cool season pastures like fescue also need protection from excessive grazing since the rate of recovery for all pastures will depend on the vigor of the root systems coming out of the drought.

Just as the shortage of suitable forage has prompted some producers to sell part or all of their herds, the want for quantity or quality water may also justify operation changes. As a yearlong enterprise, cowherds place a greater demand on water sources, particularly rural, well, and hauled water.

As an alternative, one might shift to a spring/summer stocker operation that would reduce water usage throughout the year.

Silt removal from ponds became as common as political advertisements during the summer and fall of 2012. But how does one prevent the cleanout process from becoming as repetitious as politicians campaign promises?

Silt that causes pond reservoirs to become shallow comes from two sources-the drainage that supplies the water and erosion of the banks caused mostly by livestock activity. Limiting silt in the inflowing runoff requires a good vegetative cover, both living plants and mulch, over as much area as possible.

Treatment of gullies and cattle trails will also reduce the silt load entering a pond. Silt removed and stacked within the drainage of a pond should be reseeded just like the dam to control erosion.

Fencing of the pond dam and reservoir will greatly reduce bank erosion as a silt source. Fence design should create a grass buffer to filter sediment and nutrients from water incoming to the reservoir. Where conditions allow, a livestock water supply line leading to a tank below should be installed during the renovation process. Otherwise, providing a limited access lane with a hardened surface has proven to be a cost-effective way to enhance the life of the reservoir.

Planning is essential to developing and maintaining reliable supplies of good quality water.

Landowners can get technical assistance from conservation professionals to assess current conditions and plan for the future.

Financial help is also available for certain measures that address issues to solve soil and water problems. Landowners wanting to improve range and pasture conditions or livestock water supply situations should contact their local Conservation District office, a K-State Extension Watershed Specialist, or Kansas Rural Center for technical guidance and sources of possible financial assistance.

Dale Kirkham can be reached at dalekirkham@msn.com