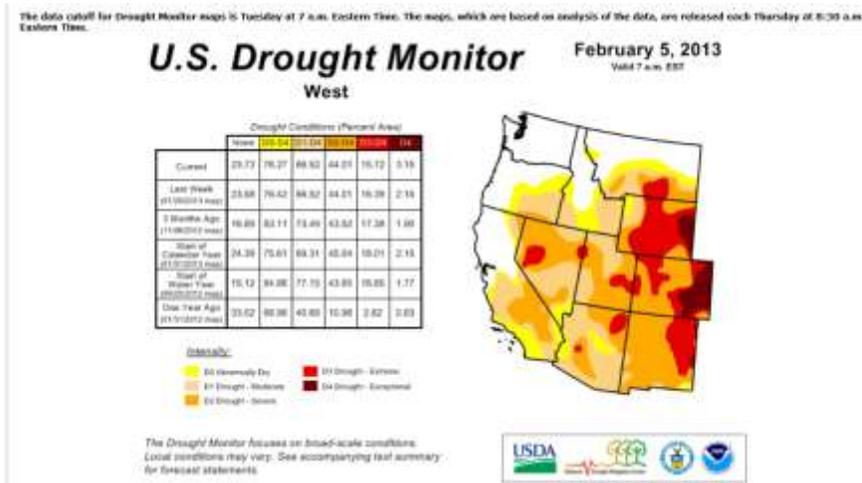


Preparing for Summer Drought

By Larry Hyslop



Elko County will remain in a severe/extreme drought

Snow may still cover the ground around Elko, but the drought is not over. Rangeland managers are worried about, and preparing for, this summer's drought conditions.

Bryan Fuell is the BLM's Wells Field Office Manager. He said "droughts don't happen one year at a time, it's not a one-year event but happens over a period of time." Last year was bad enough with very little new vegetation produced. Nothing is going to be available this summer unless it grows this spring and summer.

Gregg Symonds of the Squaw Valley Ranch is not worried about having forage since the ranch has good carryover from past summers. The worry for this summer is having enough irrigation water. Half of the ranch's browse comes from irrigated fields and irrigation water comes from snow pack. The ranch will begin irrigating earlier, which will help, and stream flow is better now due to work the ranch has done to improve riparian conditions along ranch streams.

The worst problem for Jon Griggs of the Maggie Creek Ranch is producing enough hay. Last summer's crop was only 50% of normal, forcing the ranch to reduce their cattle herd. If this summer does not see a better hay crop, more cattle may need to be sold. The BLM has not asked the ranch for a reduction in cattle or time on the range during the coming season and seems to be satisfied with the current range condition.

The BLM's Elko District Office sent out letters to leases of public grazing permits, asking ranchers to get together with their Rangeland Management Specialist and look at the range conditions and grazing plan. Bryan said most ranchers know what is needed and are making voluntary reductions in light of the continuing drought.

The district is completing an Environmental Assessment for the present and future droughts, which will give them the flexibility to adjust range management during droughts. This flexibility might involve temporary reductions in cattle numbers or length of time on the grazing allotment but might also include grazing times outside of the ranch's grazing plan.

Fewer wild horses live in Elko County than livestock and Herd Management Areas involve fewer acres than livestock grazing allotments, but there is still the question of wild horse populations during a drought. Bryan said they would be removed or numbers reduced only as a last resort. The policy says livestock must be removed first if range conditions are poor and livestock are much easier to remove

than horses. Unfortunately, funding and availability of long-term holding sites must also be considered when talking about gathering wild horses.

The BLM's Battle Mountain District Office got an early start on drought preparation. During his past winter, BLM personnel worked with 27 grazing allotment permittees. All permittees signed voluntary agreements regarding this summer's grazing plans. The idea is to identify areas of allotments with native plant communities and defer grazing in these spots until native plants have gone dormant in July. Also, riparian areas will not be grazed until September. Areas with non-native plants, such as burn scars, crested wheatgrass seedings and cheatgrass monocultures will be used more. Water hauling will be used to get cattle into these type areas.

Doug Furtado, Battle Mountain District Manager said "if we can all work together, get agreements set up front, we can avoid closures and avoid some of the worse effects of this drought."

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