Ranching Through Droughts
By Dr. Terry Bidwell

Drought is common in the Great Plains and can persist for many years. The drought of the 1930’s is probably one that many people have heard of but a more recent and severe drought was during the mid 1950’s.

When I was growing up in the McAlester area in the 1950’s, I remember seeing pickups with cattle racks lined up as far as you could see at the Union Stockyards. I asked my dad why people were selling their cattle and he said “they ran out of water.” That was a time before there were many stock ponds and ranchers watered their cattle in creeks which had never gone dry in anyone’s memory.

Long-term weather data suggest that we are overdue for another major long-term drought but only time will tell. Are you prepared?

Ranchers that traditionally run too many cattle for the ranch to support, as evidenced by months of feeding hay in normal precipitation years and frequent herbicide applications, are unprepared for drought and risk going out of business. At best they will have to rent additional grazing resources or buy feed, usually at inflated prices, to avoid liquidating the cow herd. Being overstocked before and during drought will have a negative impact for several years and take significant stocking rate reductions for grass to recover.

Preparing for a drought primarily involves using a conservative stocking rate—the cow enterprise accounts for 60 to 70 percent use of forage production in the average year. In years of abundant rainfall, the cow-calf producer uses the extra forage for grazing with stocker cattle.

In drought years, the ranch does not run additional cattle, but stays in business because of a conservative stocking rate that reserves forage for drought and maintains vigor of forage plants. Hopefully this is not the next big drought but only time will tell.

Preparing for a drought happens before the drought, not during the drought. Ranchers who have been in business for many years have either learned the hard way or have seen neighbors suffer and understand the consequences.

Dr. Terry Bidwell is an Extension Range Specialist in NREM at Oklahoma State University.

Being overstocked only exacerbates the impact of drought.