

Drought causes heavy losses for county cattle ranchers

County ranchers forced to sell portions of herds amid drought

By [Carol Lawrence](#)

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photos by [TROY HARVEY](#)/THE STAR Cattle eat hay at R.A. Cattle Co. near Ventura on Tuesday morning. Richard Atmore Jr. has been supplementing his cattle with hay and supplements because low rainfall this year has led to a lack of grass on his property.

In a normal year, enough grass grows on Richard Atmore Jr.'s 7,000 acres in Sexton Canyon above Ventura to feed his roughly 400 cattle.

But this year, grass that normally grows 2 feet tall grew only 4 inches, and thinner. Pastures that feed Atmore's cattle for six weeks lasted only two, he said.

Atmore estimates he lost 90 percent of that food, and he isn't alone among the county's 110 cattle ranchers.

The drought that has constrained water supplies in Ventura County has killed 95 percent of the grass on hillsides on which cattle graze throughout the region.

As a result, cattle ranchers including Atmore have had to sell large portions of their herd early and spend more money to buy feed and nutritional supplements for the cows they can afford to keep.

“I lost this year because of extra feed and selling calves early and will lose next year because I will have less calves to sell,” said Atmore of R.A. Cattle Co. “Next year I will have to buy cattle, and I’ll be feeling this drought for a couple of years financially.”

To avoid overgrazing the patches he had left, Atmore has sold about 250 animals from his typical 400 and predicts he may have only 60 left by year’s end.

Rainfall amounts vary significantly across the county, but all areas have seen sharp reductions. For this past year, rainfall has been from 24 percent of the 14.7 inches a year that’s considered normal by the Ventura County Watershed Protection District to almost 50 percent of normal.

This year was definitely dry but just one of the several dry years in past decades, said Bruce Rindahl, the district’s manager of the water resources and technology division.

“It rained OK in November and December, but after that it stopped raining,” Rindahl said.

The California State Board of Food and Agriculture and the California Water Commission will meet Sept. 10 in Sacramento to discuss the state’s water supply because, “Nine of the state’s major reservoirs are below historic average levels, and six of these are below 50 percent total capacity.”

The drought has forced nearly every rancher in the county to sell cattle this year, said Tom Crocker, president of the Ventura County Cattlemen’s Association. Two large ranchers who raise more than 100 heads have had to sell all their cattle, he added.

Raising cattle is a \$1.9 million industry in the county and falls under the auspices of the county’s agricultural commissioner, Henry Gonzales.

By late May, Gonzales had requested the Agriculture Department declare the county a primary drought disaster area after his office found ranchers had lost 79 percent of their grazing land. The agency agreed in mid-June and made the declaration.

“I wanted it to go on record that we were an area that has been affected to that level,” Gonzales said.

By early July, Gonzales’s office estimated grazing land losses averaged 95 percent countywide.

Cattle ranchers graze their livestock on 195,000 of the county’s 1.2 million acres and on the annual and perennial grasses that grow on the hills above Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, Point Mugu and Ojai, according to Atmore. A 1,000-pound animal needs 25 acres to live on in a normal year, he said, but that number has jumped to 80 acres in Gonzales’ report.

The grass, or pastureland, is the main value of a cattle operation. It is to ranchers what vegetables and fruit are to growers. To rest the grass and prevent overgrazing, ranchers “holistically manage” pastures by moving animals around, Atmore said.

But cattle ranchers operate as dryland farmers. They don’t irrigate and rely on rain alone to grow a grass crop, and it suffers when too little rain falls.

“That’s not a sustainable strategy when we have back-to-back drought years,” Gonzales said. “As we’re seeing even with irrigation operations, there’s less water and it’s just a cumulative effect.”

When there is too little grass to support a herd, ranchers sell cows and calves. Atmore said his herd of 125 is the smallest he’s had “in a long, long time.”

He expects to take a loss this year and probably next year because he had to sell calves early that were putting too much of a strain on their mothers. Many weighed 300 pounds, compared with the 500 to 600 pounds at which he normally sells them at higher prices. He also will have fewer calves to sell next year.

Selling cattle provides a small monetary relief, but it doesn’t last, Crocker said. Ranchers still have to pay for the land they’re leasing and other expenses, including hay.

Also, selling cattle early at lower prices will hurt profits later because the cost to buy back cattle in the following years will likely be higher.

“On a drought that encompasses such a large area, there’s going to be a big demand for people to buy back replacement cattle, and this will drive up prices,” Crocker said. “It’s a big enough drought that it will have an effect on the market.”

Ranchers in the county who have suffered losses this year and bought crop insurance under the Agriculture Department’s Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program have help coming. The agency just got approval to start reimbursing 43 percent of a policyholder’s loss, said Brenda Farias, executive director for the department’s Farm Services Agency in Santa Maria.

“This year, it’s bad,” Farias said. “Everybody seems to be in the 90s (percent) of losses.

<http://www.vcstar.com/news/2013/sep/05/drought-causes-heavy-losses-for-county-cattle/>