

Waiting for the Storm to Pass



Drought. The one word that every farmer and rancher fears. Waking up everyday with the uncertainty of how much longer they can last, if they can feed their cattle today, or even is this the last day they will be in operation. Cattle ranchers in West Texas are still reaping the effects of the drought that began back in 2011, with one of the hottest and driest years since the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. But there are some ranchers that are not ready to give up hope.

Blake Fennell, a cattle rancher and farmer in Springlake, Texas, has been involved in this

industry since he was born. He continued his love for agriculture after high school by attending Texas Tech University and graduating with a degree in Agronomy. He always planned on going back to the family business and continuing what his family started.

What makes Fennell's operation so unique to West Texas is he raises wheat pasture cattle. These

are cattle that are grazing on a wheat and grass fields irrigated and planted by Fennell. The water that they use to irrigate

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the fields with are farm water wells and even in this drought those wells won't last for long.

"Well one thing that sets us apart from probably

some other similar operations of wheat pasture cattle is that all of our wheat pasture is irrigated farm ground,” Fennell said. “But along the same lines as the drought the diminishing water sources are making us very concerned with the operation.”

Fennell explained the issues at hand and problems they are facing. All of the corners of their pivots are planted to grass for grazing in the fall and they are seeing some issues with the grass getting thinner and getting sand covered in spots due to the drought. They don’t know how much longer they can keep doing this if the drought does not subside.

The drought that hit the hardest in 2011 was the beginning to a cattle industry nightmare. Having the hottest temperatures on record in Texas, it became a struggle to not only be able to feed the cattle, but be able to grow and buy feed to keep a herd going. By 2014, over 15 percent of cattle had been sold to feed lots due to increase in feed costs. A large bale of normal hay was at an all time high of \$260 a bale. The weather has thrown the ranchers for a loop leaving them with little to no options on how to stay in business.

“We cannot control the weather” Fennell said. “We have to take what is handed to us, plan accordingly and try to survive without selling our herd.”

Keeping cattle in a drought stricken state as well as country you begin to see the effects not only on the rancher but the consumer as well. Texas has lost cattle due to the drought from lack of water and feed to ranchers trying to do what’s best for them and the cattle and sell off their herds to feedlots and processing houses. Ranchers who can’t afford to feed or keep their cattle are selling them to slaughter. This, plus feed costs being at an all-time high, has caused cattle prices to be higher than ever before.

Since 2011 the drought has started to relieve itself. Farmers and ranchers are finally seeing those effects. Reservoirs are now filling slowly with the little rain


received, and feed and cattle prices still are on the rise. Even though we are seeing a light at the end of the tunnel in this drought Fennell is concerned that if they do keep these cattle, will they be able to sell and then replace with new cattle to continue the operation.

Some ranchers may never be able to be in the cattle industry again if the cattle prices do not decrease. They will want to rebuild their herds but it might be near impossible. Rick Machado a world champion auctioneer and cattle broker, also a cattle rancher himself, is concerned for the everyday cattle rancher.

“The cattle market is at an all-time high along with feed costs as well. The hardest part about the rise in the market prices is that they will stay high after the drought, it will be hard for

ranchers who have had to sell off their herds who want to start up again,” Machado said.

Fennell has hope and he plans to continue cattle ranching until his dying day. Springslake, Texas will always be his home and his cattle will always be apart of his life. Fennell has yet had to sell any of his herd and continues to want to see it through with his family with him.

“I won’t let harsh weather bring my family down,” Fennell said. “This is my legacy for my kids one day and a drought won’t be the end of that.” 



The cattle at Fennell Farms are all numbered with ear tags for identification when sold and doctored.

Marissa Mankins
PISMO BEACH, CALIFORNIA

