

## Alternative Cow-Calf Grazing Concepts: A Rancher's Perspective

There are many ways that cows can be run on the range. Many ranchers spread their cows out across the entire ranch, letting them graze where they want through the year and gathering only when it's time to brand and vaccinate or at weaning. These operations typically seek to maximize the number of cows on the ranch in order to maximize returns.

Drought years can change everything. The number of animals that a ranch can feed in a severe drought might be only half, or even a quarter, as many cows as in a more typical rainfall year. The subsequent culling of cows can be emotionally painful and economically harmful. In dry years, everyone is selling and prices will be depressed. After a drought, it can be a long, slow process to rebuild your herd from within, or a costly one to purchase replacement animals, some of which will not be well-acclimated to your range.

A potential alternative is to run fewer cows than a ranch could typically support, and in drought years you can hang on to your cows, or perhaps only sell a few. In wetter years, you can keep your weaned calves until maturity, or purchase stockers to convert the extra forage into protein and keep your operation going at full capacity.

Operationally, this mixed cow-calf plus stocker approach can be used effectively by keeping a portion of the ranch untouched until you know what the rains have brought. If dry, use the unused fields for your cows; but if it's wet, use those same fields for your stockers.

Another concept is rotational grazing. Some landowners create small pastures and move their cows frequently. Usually, the cows will get used to this arrangement and will be eager to move to the new field without pressure. Larger ranches may not be able to create small pastures because of the cost of fencing. While electric fences can be quickly and easily installed in regions where the land is wet and soft most of the year, in the Southwestern US, the ground is too hard and the terrain too rugged to move the fences quickly and easily.

Instead of electric fences for small pasture rotation, ranchers can put all their cows together in one large field for a few weeks, then gather and move them to the next large pasture. This is more labor-intensive, but crowding the field encourages the cows to move into harder-to-reach areas and to clean up the forage, rather than eating only favored plants, which leaves woody and weedy species to gain a competitive advantage later. With well-timed rainfall, a pasture that is grazed near the end of the growing season can also regrow before turning dry, giving the rancher more forage than would otherwise be available.