UNCE helps ranchers in drought

It’s been a tough year for Nevada’s ranchers. Not only has a lingering drought reduced the available forage on public lands, but massive wildfires this summer scorched hundreds of thousands of acres of rangeland used by cattle herds. To make matters worse, many ranchers had to cut back on their hay and alfalfa cultivation due to dwindling irrigation supplies.

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension has responded by working closely with many Nevada ranchers to help them weather the storm. In October, UNCE’s Herds & Harvest program, which helps ranchers and farmers improve their bottom line through planning and business training, held eight workshops around the state.

“The fires in the state have destroyed federal grazing opportunities for many Nevada ranchers,” said Staci Emm ’96 (journalism-public relations), the Mineral County extension educator who heads up the Herds & Harvest program. “This, combined with limited water supplies in certain parts of the state, forces producers to make difficult management decisions.”

Ranchers requested the assistance and UNCE responded with workshops that brought together federal and state agencies providing technical information and financial assistance for struggling agricultural producers. For instance, the U.S. Farm Service Agency was on hand to discuss emergency loans and water hauling and fence repair programs. The U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service was available to discuss help with reseeding scorched rangeland, developing springs for watering and fencing.

Extension educators and specialists have also been working informally with ranchers to answer questions and share information about coping with the drought and fires.

Humboldt County Extension Educator Brad Schultz ’87M.S. (resource management) has been advising ranchers to plan now in case 2013 turns out to be as dry as 2012.

“It’s important to have contingency plans in place,” Schultz said.

Schultz noted that Nevada ranchers are facing a number of compounding problems. Calves are smaller, sheep and cows are being forced to expend more energy to walk to watering troughs, and the quality of sheep wool is declining. Ranchers are being forced to rent pasture land or cull their herds by selling off animals they can’t afford to feed. He’s also been advising them to improve water-related infrastructures, repair leaky troughs and water lines, identify animals for early sale based on their historic productive and nutritional need, and look for cost savings that will help them set aside funds for supplemental feed next year.

Jay Davison, a UNCE alternative crops and forage specialist, said the drought is primarily affecting ranchers who rely on rangelands as primary forage for their livestock. He said this year’s water supplies were sufficient for farmers’ “normal crop production activities.”

“As far as next year is concerned, no one has any idea what will happen,” Davison said. “Wide swings in water supplies due to erratic precipitation is normal in Nevada.”

Schultz completes a Forage Loss Assessment each fall, and the U.S. Farm Services Agency uses it to determine if livestock producers should receive insurance payments to offset significant losses from drought or other disasters.

“These payments can keep ranchers in business if they have to buy expensive feed to replace cheap rangeland forage,” Schultz said.

He noted that helping keep livestock producers going is crucial to rural economies.

“Livestock sales have an economic multiplier of almost three in these rural Nevada communities,” Schultz said. “So when a drought hits, it’s more than the livestock producers or farmers who are affected. A lot of people get hurt.”