

Ranchers thirst for drought aid

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County leaders could come riding to the rescue of local ranchers Tuesday as they consider whether to declare a local drought.

That would be the first step for cattle and sheep owners to get loans and tax relief.

Kern County has seen far below normal levels of rain for the past year, leaving grazing lands barren, ranchers say. According to a University of California researcher, the drought conditions are the worst seen in the county in 70 years.

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LIVESTOCK: Ag commissioner puts Kern cattle, sheep loses at \$55 million

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The barren ranch land has led to a massive sell-off of local herds.

Kern County Agricultural Commissioner Ted Davis estimated that 80 percent of local cattle were either sold at a loss or shipped to other areas since fall 2001. Sheep, another Kern County staple, also have been hit.

"It looks like the total losses are around \$55 million to the livestock industry," Davis said.

In comparison, the entire local livestock industry produced \$68 million in 2001, according to county statistics.

If county supervisors approve the drought status declaration, it could open the door for federal agencies to declare a state of emergency, Davis said.

That would qualify local ranchers for federal assistance and low-interest loans to help rebuild their herds — if the rains return. If not, ranchers could also benefit from deferring taxes that would allow them to sell their herds now and then buy them back later, once grazing lands have improved.

"If you get the (tax-deferral) you have three years to reinvest your money to avoid paying the taxes," said longtime local rancher Ken Twisselman.

Twisselman said he was forced to ship most of his cattle — roughly 600 head — to still-green pastures near Sacramento in April. He kept only a small herd of 40 or so cows at his family's westside ranch.

"It was so dry here and so overwhelming that we had no choice," he said. "I've already sold heavily. All I've got left is the nucleus."

A lifelong rancher, Twisselman said he hasn't seen drier conditions in decades.

"There were some dry years in the '60s," he said. "And there was a really bad year when I was in high school in the '40s. But this is pretty bad."

According to the National Weather Service, Bakersfield received just 3.6 inches of rain in the 2001-02 water year, which runs from July to July. That is well below the average of just under 6.5 inches per year.

The two years before that also experienced below-average rainfall.

That has left precious few grasses, which grazing cattle and sheep rely on, said Loran Hodge, head of the Kern County Farm Bureau. Without the grass, ranchers can be forced to cull their herds — or buy up feed.

That's an expensive proposition, Twisselman said. Twisselman, whose family has raised cattle for more than 100 years locally, said he is hoping to preserve his herd's genetics.

"We may have to sell some to pay for feed," he said. "I'm not sure what we are going to do. We're going to do our darndest to hang onto them."

Paying for feed or selling off cattle at a loss has already cost local ranchers \$50 million since last fall, according to a report by University of California researchers. Local sheep herders also racked up \$5 million in losses, the report states.

Even with federal assistance, recovery will not be quick, county officials said. It is expected to take local ranchers three to five years to rebuild their herds — with a little help from the skies.