

A composite image for the Welch Cattle Company header. On the left, two brown and white calves are shown in a close-up. On the right, a wide landscape view shows a green field with a few cows grazing under a blue sky with a vibrant rainbow arching over the horizon.

Welch Cattle Company



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Introduction

Welch Cattle Company is a family cow/calf operation headed by John Welch, who is also Past-President and CEO of Spade Ranches in Texas.

Ranch inventory

The Welch Cattle Company's forage resources include wheat and oat pasture (some under pivots) as well as owned and leased range and forage resources in Texas, New Mexico, southeastern Colorado, and Montana.

The native range in southeastern Colorado includes primarily short grasses (western wheatgrass and sideoats grama). The climate is semi-arid, with 13 inches average (annual) precipitation, ranging from 4.0 inches (2002) to 22.5 inches (1941). 2012 and 2013 ranked as the 2nd and 4th driest years on record for the area.

The pasture and crop ground in Texas lie in the Central Rolling Red Plains, with mixed-grass prairies. The region receives an average of 25.3 inches of precipitation annually. Historical range of 9.8 inches (1956) to 40.4 inches (2015).

Strategies for preparing for drought

- **Strategize grazing.** Rest-rotation or high intensity/low frequency grazing based on the principal of resting every pasture for a longer period of time than it is grazed, and staggering the times of year when particular pastures are grazed. *I think it increases the vigor of the plants and it makes them respond quicker when we do get rain.*

- **Moderate stocking rate.** While some have advocated rotation grazing as a means to increase stocking rates, Welch cautions against the practice in semi-arid regions like his. *"They say you can do it if you're agile, but I think it leads to having to sell livestock when prices are low, and buying when prices are high. Then you're broke."*
- **Diversify grazing locations.** Partnerships and leased lands in multiple states are part of the annual grazing plan, but also provide additional flexibility during drought events that are fairly localized.
- **Build diversity into ranch enterprises.** Daybreak Ranch operates commercial upland bird and deer hunting businesses, adding diversity to the operation.
- **Pasture Range and Forage Insurance.** The Welch's consider PRF insurance essential to their operation, and said the ultimate benefit of the program is keeping meat costs lower for consumers.

Critical dates and target conditions

- **End of May.** April and May represent the bulk of their rainfall, and Welch said they can make drought management decisions fairly early. *"When we don't get [the April-May rain], we are counting on summer thunderstorms, and you know it's going to be tough."*

Read the full case study at,

drought.unl.edu/ranchplan/WriteaPlan/SampleDroughtPlans.aspx.

What is monitored and how

- **Range conditions and precipitation.** Welch Cattle Company managers monitor as they move through rotated pastures, paying attention to precipitation and forage growth. Welch also pays attention to the forecasters on long-term weather trends like La Niña or El Niño. He advocates frequently visiting the pastures. *"Spend the time out there to see how forage is doing, how the cows are doing, and I think you'll sense changes [in moisture and forage conditions] faster than someone else [or decision-support tools] can quantify."*

Strategies during drought

- **Planned de-stocking.** In order, they move or sell stocker cattle, old cows, bred heifers, young cows and yearling replacement heifers during drought.
- **Lease ground in less dry areas.** Because of the partnerships they've developed over the years, and geographic diversity of owned and leased grounds, the Welch Cattle Company has some flexibility in moving cattle to better forage during drought.

Strategies for recovering from drought

- **Monitor, restock.** Welch continues monitoring to determine how quickly to bring animals back into pastures. Through many recent droughts, including 2012, they have been able to restock fairly quickly because of the effects of their grazing system and timely destocking during drought.
- **Financial matters.** Welch is cautious about using liquidated assets (from cattle sales) as household income during and after drought. He recommends considering off-ranch employment if necessary to supplement household income.

Lessons learned during drought

- **Move with the speed of the drought.** In 2012, drought developed very quickly, and managers rapidly made decisions to move animals quickly. They used their drought plan, quickly moving through their prioritized classes. They did make a decision to spend money moving some of their cowherd to other locations, and then ship them back after the recovery. This was helpful because cattle prices rose following the 2012 drought, and replacement cattle cost up to three times what the cow might have been worth prior.
- **Evaluate and re-evaluate your drought plan.** Welch has been satisfied with how their drought plan has worked, even through the extreme drought of 2012, and is not planning any major changes to it in the near future.

Some general recommendations

- **Be conservative in what you expect your ranch to support.** "When figuring if you can make it on a ranch, don't confuse average stocking rate with maximum stocking rate."
- **It doesn't rain grass.** *"[What's] important to remember is it doesn't rain grass. It rains water, and that grows grass, but not immediately. So you can't say, whoa we got a half inch last night, we can quit moving cattle."*
- **Partner up to prepare for drought.** *"We couldn't have done it without [the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)]."*
- **Make your drought contingency plan ahead of time and write it down.** *"Everybody always says you never make a good decision in a drought and you never make a bad one when it's raining, and that's pretty much right. But you've got to start."*

This work is supported by a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of the Chief Economist.

"A rain doesn't get you out of the drought the next day. If you don't set a timetable and stick to what you say you'll do, you'll say: 'Well, I saw on the news where there's a 20% chance of rain a week from Friday. So let's wait until then.' Well, you've got to quit doing that."— John Welch