

Too Wet. Too Dry. What (Which) Is Worse?

—Ulf Kintzel

This spring brought unprecedented rainfall. It was incredibly wet. At our farm, in two places, a six-inch drainage pipe that had worked well for over a decade could not handle the amount of water. The water surfaced in the pasture. There were wet spots in places in the month of June where it should have dried up sometime in April when the grass started growing.

In May and June, the pasture grew rapidly. Haying was an almost impossible task. I caught the one and only three-day window of dry weather to make dry hay in early June. Most people around me missed out on an early cut, in part because the fields were too wet to be hayed.

Knowing that the weather pattern can change

quickly, I pointed to the rain gauge one day after another big rain event on top of another and said, “The day will come when we appreciate that we got that rain.”

That day came in July. The weather pattern had changed. It was dry. We were at first lucky and received some rain during two separate rain events. That luck ran out by August. By mid-August the orchard grass started to crunch under my feet, and it crackled when I walked through the pasture. Only the few patches of tall fescue were as green as ever, pretending there was no shortage in rainfall. Heavy thunderstorms were forecast. None came.

First it was too wet. Then it was too dry. So, what is worse? If I had to pick one condition over the other, which would I pick?

Let’s start with some good old-fashioned Old-World



First it was too wet...then it was too dry.



sayings. The Germans, especially German farmers, have a saying for any life situation, especially when it comes to weather. They are called *Bauernregeln*. In this case, they say “Fürchte die nassen Jahre, nicht die trockenen.” (Fear the wet years, not the dry ones.) The Dutch, not to be outdone, have their own saying describing these circumstances. As an old Dutch farmer in New Jersey once told me. “In a dry year you worry to death. In a wet year you starve to death.”

In the spring, I had ample grass. The water content was so high that many sheep could not excrete the excess water with their urine. That means they got diarrhea. In addition, various internal parasites thrive when it is that wet. They too caused diarrhea. The diarrhea was pervasive. It led to weight loss in quite a few lambs that needed to be put in the barn and fed dry hay while I was trying to figure out the exact cause of the condition.

The life cycle of the deadly Barber pole worm is supercharged under these conditions. Especially young lambs were affected by it and needed to be dewormed, some repeatedly.

Then came the flies when it got warmer. Particularly the stable flies made the lives of the sheep miserable when they rested in the shade by biting them and sucking blood.

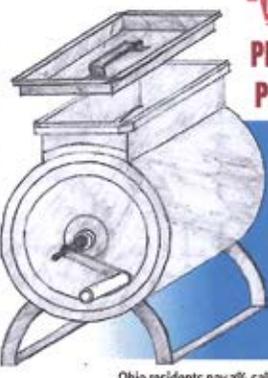
Foot scald, an inflammation between the cloven hooves of a sheep, can occur quite frequently when it is that wet. It is caused by bacteria that are always present in the pasture. While it is not contagious and should not be confused with footrot, it is quite a nuisance. Several times, I had to let the flock go through a foot bath to stop the infections. The zinc sulfate used for the foot bath is not cheap.

I mentioned that I took a chance when three days of dry weather were forecast and got all my hay made for the winter without it getting a drop of rain. Many others either waited longer to cut or their hay got rained on, both scenarios detrimental to the quality.

Last, pasture is often underutilized in wet conditions because the sheep drag soil around on their hooves. The soiled pasture is not eaten.

Then the weather changed. The pasture and all wet spots dried up. So did the diarrhea. The worm load started to be far lower. The larvae of the Barber pole worm need dew to crawl up on the blades of grass to be consumed by the sheep while grazing. Well, there have been many days without any dew. On those days that we had dew; the windy conditions and high temperatures dried it up quickly. The worm pressure ceded.

Drier pasture is grazed more evenly by sheep. Less

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grass is wasted. The forage, now lacking moisture, is more nutrient dense. The sheep get to fill their bellies with nutrients rather than with water. They get to drink the exact amount of water they need at the water trough and not an ounce of unnecessary water enters their bodies.

Farmers around me started making the most beautiful second-cutting hay, perhaps with a lower yield but drying it in record time, which helps preserve nutrients. I did not attempt making second-cutting hay and grazed my hay fields instead.

With the worm pressure gone, the lambs that had suffered from parasites and diarrhea started to fatten out. Not a single sheep limped because foot scald does not develop when it is so dry. The stable flies nearly disappeared since the larvae and pupae need moist conditions to thrive and likewise die when it is hot.

I had hoped for a fall flush. Surely the month of September must bring some rain. It always does. Except for a short tease of some rain falling at the beginning of September, it stayed dry for the rest of the month and into the next. The rain, however limited it was, that fell in October helped it to green up, but it was too late for any significant growth. There was no fall flush. Stockpiling pasture was very limited.

As of this writing at the beginning of November,

I still have several weeks of grazing left. I am always understocked for the reason of a possible drought. Also, I can afford to skip making second-cutting hay and graze the fields instead. Yet, my grazing season, usually reaching into the first half of January, will be cut short by several weeks, perhaps even by almost two months.

So, the damage by the dry weather is real and comes at a monetary cost. However, the quality of the pasture (as far as nutrients is concerned), as well as the health and condition of the sheep, is great. I could not say the same thing under conditions that are too wet.

You probably gleaned from it by now that I much prefer too dry conditions over too wet conditions. When it is too dry, you bring home less but the quality is good. When it is too wet, you may bring home nothing at all.

(Disclaimer: When I describe dry conditions, I describe what is "normal" to experience in the Northeast, New England, and the Midwest. I do not describe conditions like severe and prolonged Western droughts. They are an entirely different matter and often grounds to call it quits.)

As far as the plentiful German farmers' sayings go, here is another one: (*"Kräht der Hahn auf dem Mist, ändert sich das Wetter oder es bleibt, wie es ist."*) (If the rooster crows on top of the manure pile, the weather will change, or it will stay the same.) That too is true every single time.



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