By Gary Frasier

Frasier's Philosophy

Water—the essence of life. Without it, we cannot survive. The experts tell us that in much of the West, we have gone through a drought period of 3–5 years and maybe even longer in some areas. Will it continue? This, we do not know. Even in periods of drought, there can be too much water. In many instances, the water that we do get as precipitation is not distributed uniformly over the land, or else, it comes all at one time. As I write, I am listening to the news of massive amounts of rain and snow in California and Nevada.

Another problem is that we sometimes have a short memory. All too frequently, we forget during the periods of adequate water how to cope with limited water supplies in other times. Some of our readers can probably remember the drought of the 1930s, the "Dust Bowl" years. That is before my time. I do remember the dry years of the 1950s. As a rancher or resource manager, it is very disheartening to look out across the land and see very little evidence of growing plants and to look at the sky and see no signs of moisture. If this continues over a large area for several years, we call it a drought. It makes the national news. Legislators spend time and money to "solve" the problem. As soon as it starts raining, the problem vanishes from the public's eye. That does not mean that we have solved the problem. History tells us that it will happen again.

What does all this mean? To ensure that our rangeland resources are viable over a long term, we must always keep in mind that there will be periods of drought that reduce the plant resources. We must try to anticipate what the next year will bring. Many range plants have developed over a long period of time, which means that they have experienced droughts. Yet they have survived. This means that, even in good years, we must manage the rangelands resources on a conservative basis. Instead of saving for a "rainy" day, manage the resources so you can withstand a "dry" day.

I have spent a career studying rangeland water management in semiarid and arid regions. One thing that I have learned is that there have been periods in the past when drought was much more severe than anything we have experienced in recent times. Viable civilizations have vanished when extended droughts occurred. Could these civilizations have survived if there had been a better understanding of how to manage the natural resources in times of limited water resources? I would like to think so.

One thing I am sure of, droughts will occur in the future. Even in good years, there are usually areas where the rains are scarce.

This issue of *Rangelands* has "Water and Drought" as its theme. There are several articles that show the impact of drought on rangeland management and also how to efficiently use water when it is limited.

Let us not forget… ◆