Everybody Talks About the Weather But…

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Weather events during the past few years have had a serious impact on a lot of people. Hurricane Katrina, flooding in the Midwest, drought and heat in the Southern Great Plains (especially Texas and Oklahoma), more tornadoes, etc. Closer to home we have had a severe ice storm that we were unprepared for (they usually occur farther to the south). There was a flood that put Nashville underwater and in April of this year western Kentucky had 22 inches of rainfall. This summer seemed to be hotter than normal, too.

Is this a foreboding of things to come – or a pattern? Could climate change be occurring and could there be such a thing as “global warming”? Forget, at least for a moment, that this has become a political “hot potato”. Perhaps we should at least talk about the weather even if it is not the “safe” subject that it once was.

What I think or what I want to be true doesn’t really matter. A closer look at knowledgeable experts who publish refereed research articles in respected scientific journals is warranted, though. What do they think? In this case, 97 to 98 percent of practicing climate scientists are convinced that global warming is occurring and nearly 100 scientific societies have published statements endorsing this concept (e-mail me rburris@uky.edu for more details). They could still be wrong but a consensus of this magnitude on a controversial topic by scientists who are trained to be skeptical is remarkable.

At this point, it is interesting to discuss what climate change could mean to agriculture and beef production if it is happening. Overall, what could we expect? Increasing global temperatures would likely increase climatic variability (not just heat). Droughts would likely become more severe, intense storms and precipitation events could become more frequent. A greater number of days with extremely high temperatures could be expected. Hail, wind and flood damage may be more common. Greater temperature swings during the winter months would be likely.

The drought in Texas and Oklahoma which is in its 4th year now could give some indication of what could happen to agricultural interests. Cattle are being sold off in this part of the country – some are going to slaughter but many are being re-distributed to the north and northwest. Is this a trend or just temporary? Could water become the next agricultural commodity?

A state like Kentucky would likely be affected since we are in what a lot of people refer to as the “transition zone” between north and south – for agricultural purposes. What can we do here? How would this phenomenon affect us?

First of all, we could see increased use of warm season grasses to provide us with more reliable grazing during July and August. We might also have more opportunity to graze cool season grasses, like fescue, farther into the winter and utilize more stockpiling for winter feed. If winters are milder, we could see more weeds and insect pests. Planting times and growing regions would also change.
We could observe less livestock production in the summer months. We might need to select animals that are more heat tolerant within breeds that we are using – or infuse some *bos indicus* into breeding females for more heat tolerance. We might have to consider changing our breeding seasons, perhaps, start breeding cows earlier than May 20 or utilize fall breeding/calving.

Sometimes we need to be prepared for things that could happen and hope that they don’t. Our house is near the New Madrid fault, so I want to be sure that I have earthquake insurance. I hope that I don’t ever use it but it’s good to be prepared. You should consider how you can be prepared for increased weather events in your cattle operations – and have some insurance against drought, heat and weather extremes.

Whether or not you believe that climate change is occurring is up to you. However, recent history has shown us that we need to be prepared for whatever “Mother Nature” sends our way. This article shows that we have more questions than answers, but it shouldn’t hurt to do a little “what if” thinking.

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