

## Calif. Drought Prompts Ranchers to Sell Cattle

JASON DEAREN, Associated Press



In this Tuesday Jan. 14, 2014 photo, Jim Warren, top, owner of the 101 Livestock Market gathers cattle for an auction in Aromas, Calif. California's worsening drought is forcing many ranchers to sell their cattle and other livestock because their pastures are too dry to feed them and it's getting too expensive to buy hay and other supplemental feed. California only got a fraction of its normal rainfall last year, leaving reservoirs and groundwater levels at record lows and prompting many cities to cut water usage. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

AROMAS, Calif. (AP) — In January, business at the 101 Livestock Market's cattle auction on California's Central Coast is usually slow. The busy season is normally in June or July, when ranchers have had time to fatten their animals for weeks on spring grasses.

This year, however, business is bustling, with packed pens of moaning cattle and cowboys standing on tip-toe to get a glance at their potential prizes.

Because of historically dry conditions, California's soil moisture — a key ingredient for the forage that cattle graze on — is low throughout the state. With feed costs high and weeks of dry weather in the forecast, ranchers are already selling off parts of their herds as normally green grazing pastures have turned brown.

"We're in the drought now, so a lot of these are going back to Texas," said rancher and auction house co-owner Monty Avery, gesturing to a pen packed full of cows. "We usually sell about 100-150 animals per week. Now we're seeing 800-1,000 per week, so the volume's jumped up."

Gov. Jerry Brown has formally proclaimed a drought in California, a move that codified what farmers and ranchers in the state had known for weeks. The U.S. Drought Monitor has said there are "extreme drought" conditions in central and northern California, where much of the state's ranching is located.

California is now in its third dry year, with little snowfall so far this winter and

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forecasts suggesting only more sunshine. Precipitation in most of the state is less than 20 percent of normal and reservoirs are dwindling — one town on California's far northern coast says it has fewer than 100 days of drinking water in storage.

The state is the nation's leader in dairy cows, and fourth overall in the U.S. for total number of cattle, trailing Texas, Nebraska and Kansas, according to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. With little free food available for cattle, some ranchers have already started controlling costs.

Romaldo Martin, a cattle rancher who runs M&M Farms in Hollister, has sold more than 160 cows and calves at 101 Livestock Market over the past two weeks and plans to sell at least 100 more. He said it's too expensive to buy hay to feed his herd, and the water on his land is drying up.

"If the weather doesn't change, I might need to get rid of all of them," said Martin, who is in his 70s and used to run about 600 heads of cattle. "I've never seen anything like this in my life ... It's a disaster."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture on Jan. 16 declared a drought disaster in some California counties, which allows farmers to apply for low-interest loans to help them cope. Ranchers are not included in the program.

To help them navigate the historic dry weather, the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources is holding workshops.

"From previous droughts we've learned that feeding the whole herd through the drought may spell the end of business," said Glenn Nader, adviser for the program in Sutter and Yuba counties.

Some of California's herd will be headed to Texas, which is recovering from its own severe drought. That state's herd of five million head of cattle has shrunk over the past few years by a quarter, said Jason Cleere, a rancher and beef cattle specialist with Texas AgriLife Extension at Texas A&M University.

But as the drought has eased in most of Texas, the herd is being rebuilt, creating a market for California's ranchers looking to sell. "There's a lot of room for more cows to come into our state, and for ranchers to add some back," Cleere said.

While in the short term selling cattle can help ranchers cope, it can push more of them out of business in the long run, ranchers said. Rebuilding a herd isn't as easy as buying new cattle. It often takes time to get new cows acclimated and can take years for the animals to breed and grow.

Meantime, the state's herd will be thinned as ranchers trim costs and hope things will improve.

"You can't keep buying \$7,000-\$8,000 a load for hay. Pretty soon you're in this hole, so you sell your cattle and try to buy them back next year," said rancher Jim Warren, who co-owns the auction house.

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Associated Press reporter Terry Chea contributed to this story.

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