

Drought Options for Farmers

East Central Alberta Review, July 16, 2009

Elizabeth Allen

Reporter

In the winter of 2002, Mike Nichols from Castor, Alberta, was standing on the edge of his dugout in 30 below weather trying to break the ice that had frozen solid preventing the cows from drinking water.

As he was chipping away the ice, he suddenly fell in. Fortunately he was able to pull himself out however by the time Mike made it to the truck, his legs were frozen stiff and he was hardly able to move. It was pretty scary, said Nichols.

Nichols began looking for alternative ways to water their cattle. His search took him to the Trade Fair held each year in Red Deer where he met Jim and Jackie Anderson.

The Anderson's, who are cattle producers near Rimbey, Alberta, had also been searching for better ways to water their cattle and to protect their dugout water from becoming polluted by the cattle. They had found it was difficult to get water to their cattle throughout the year, especially in times of low rain fall or drought.

Jim Anderson worked with engineers from the Alberta Research Council in 1999 to design the Nosepump, where the cattle push the lever on the pump with their nose and water is pumped into the trough for drinking.

It's quite a unique system, said Mike Nichols, I've seen cars stopped on the side of the road to watch the cattle lined up waiting their turn for a drink. The neighbour didn't think his cows would get the hang of a nosepump, but within a few hours, his cows went right up to it, said Nichols.

The pump was available for the farmers during the drought of 2002 and has attracted a lot of media attention in the agricultural community including high praise for the pumps ease of operation and the ability to keep water sources clean.

The Nichols have installed a pump system approximately 50 to 60 feet from the edge of the dugout. We built the land up and then dug a hole for the well, installed an insulated pipe large enough so we could install two pumps in order to water our entire herd, said Nichols.

The pipe is insulated, the cement pad has insulation under it and the well is below the frost line so the cattle can still drink from the pumps in winter.

The pumps are virtually maintenance free but we still check them every day in the winter to make sure that small bits of ice that form in the trough are removed so the cattle get a good drink. I just take a rubber mallet and bang the side of the trough, then scoop out the ice. It just takes a couple of minutes, said Nichols.

The benefits of farmers using the nose pump is evident when you see how clean the dugout water is.

Nichols placed electric fencing around the dugout so the cattle can only drink from the troughs with the nose pumps. Each push from the cows nose brings up about half a litre of water into the drinking trough. Since the cattle control the pump, they will only drink as much as they need.

The next step is to try the pump on an ordinary seven inch well out in the middle of the field, said Nichols. We are planning to try that next week, said Nichols. This could be the answer for this area, especially in times of drought. The good thing about it, said Nichols, is that it works all year long. No more trying to provide water to your cattle in winter by breaking the ice and no more dirty dugout. The water stays pure and clean.

Jim and Jackie Anderson, the inventors of the Frostfree Nosepump, have been watering their own cattle with the pumps since 1999. It reduces the number of hours spent looking after the cattle and gives more time for family, said Jim Anderson.

I hardly have any manure cleanup, said Mike Nichols. It really cuts your work load in half.

Government programs

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development started a Growing Forward Initiative program on April 24, 2009. Growing Forward offers a Water Management program providing funding assistance to projects with Long Term Water Management Plans at the farm level.

The funding program [if eligible] allows a producer to receive one-third of the project costs or 50 per cent of the costs for special incentive projects that improve long-term water management. Construction of new water wells are eligible, including test drilling, new pumps [with some exceptions] and well casings.

A Grazing and Winter Feeding Management Program will also be available for producers on September 1, 2009, said Water Specialist, Murray Tenove with Alberta Agriculture. This program may be more suited to meet the producers [in the purchase of the Nosepumps] in your [Central Alberta] area, said Tenove. Program and Registration applications are available at www.growingforward.alberta.ca. Farmers are encouraged to fill out the self-assessment form to locate the program best suited to their needs. For those who require assistance in filling in the forms or for more information, you are encouraged to call: 310[FARM] 3276.

