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Dry days in Ka'u

Cattle industry particularly hard-hit by record drought

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It's been an unprecedentedly dry year, and Ka'u ranchers have felt the impact of a lack of rain.

Calves have been weaned from their mothers months early to save water, herds are frequently being moved between paddocks in search of edible greenery, and some cattle have already died.

"This drought is the worst in history, and it's really, really set in on us and everybody else hard," said Lani Petrie, co-owner of the 30,000-acre Kapapala Ranch near Pahala. "We've lost well over \$30,000 worth of cattle since about August."

Yet, despite some recent showers, rainfall numbers for the district are still down, and parts of Ka'u are nearly certain to record the driest year in their history. While the rains have helped bring some green to the area, dozens of ranch animals have already succumbed to the effects of drought.

About 100 of Kapapala's cattle died from ketosis -- a metabolic disorder that affects cattle when energy demands exceed energy, or food and supplement, intake causing the liver to overproduce compounds such as glucose, she said.

The deaths followed rounds of nutritional supplements the ranch purchased to help the animals survive the drought, she said. Trucking in feed or moving the cattle to a remote pasture would have been unaffordable for the ranch. Petrie declined to provide how many animals the ranch manages.

In order to reduce water consumption, Kapapala weaned their calves earlier this month -- a move that will likely result in a six-figure loss for the ranch, Petrie said. A calf weaned early nets less when it is sold to mainland ranches because it will likely weigh about 100 pounds less than those able to nurse for nine months, she said.

Kapapala Ranch is just one of the many areas of Ka'u experiencing severe, extreme or exceptional drought conditions, according to the Nov. 9 U.S. Drought Monitor Map, kept by the National Drought Mitigation Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Cattle from Kapapala Ranch in Ka'u are underweight because the lack of rainfall in the area has diminished grazing land as seen Wednesday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today



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Once lush and green, this pasture land on Kapapala Ranch is dry and barren with only a hint of new growth from recent rain. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

While Ka'u's drought this year may be bad, add 2010 on top of two prior years when the area received far less than half of normal rainfall levels, said Petrie. In 2009, Kapapala Ranch received just 38 percent of normal rainfall and about 41 percent of normal rainfall in 2008, Petrie said.

Through mid-November, Kapapala Ranch had received about 18 percent of its normal rainfall, according to the National Weather Service's Hydronet system of rain gauges. The area normally receives about 63 inches of rain annually. Kapapala's driest year was 1998 when 13.4 inches of rain fell, Kodama said.

The Kapapala gauge has notched just 10.33 inches of rain, well below the average 56 inches of rain the area normally receives by this time in November, said Kevin Kodama, a senior hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Honolulu. Kahuku Ranch has received just 7 percent of its normal rainfall and Pahala has received 17 percent.

"Ka'u has started to improve a little bit because of some recent rain, but they're not yet out of drought conditions," Kodama said. "No matter what rain is received these next two months, it's going to be one of the driest years on record."

Kodama forecast the area to continue seeing rain since the Ka'u region normally experiences its "wet season" between October and April. Kodama also noted Ka'u's drought conditions will likely be downgraded one level in the coming week.

"It's a start, but we're still not out of the woods yet," he said.

While Kapapala is hurting, South Point had received 2.58 inches, or just about 10 percent of the 26.1 inches the area usually tallies by the end of October.

"Everyone in Ka'u in some shape, way, form or degree is suffering from this drought," said Tess Wilkinson, owner of Big Island Alpacas, located about two miles down South Point Road. "While it's still bad for many people, we have gotten some rain recently, and we are beginning to feel some relief."

While none of her alpacas have died, thousands of gallons of water and four \$37 bails of hay were being trucked in weekly this summer to feed the 13 alpacas that call the 10-acre ranch home. With the recent rains, Wilkinson said she has not had to truck in water and is purchasing about 2.5 hay bails per week.

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