LINCOLN—With a drought as severe as last summer's, the long-lasting effects require long-term adaptations from producers who are working with the limited water supply.

As producers throughout the region search for ways to deal with the continuing drought, they can try to take advantage of the limited water they can access. University of Nebraska-Lincoln forage specialist Bruce Anderson suggests how they can do just that.

Many ponds and creeks dried up last year, leaving some cattle producers with only unreliable water sources.

"Maybe rain will replenish them this spring, but this might be a good time to develop more wells or pipelines to reliably put water into tanks," Anderson said.

Tank water may be cooler and offer easier access than ponds or creeks. It is often healthier for cattle, and they usually prefer it. When cows walk into ponds and creeks, they stir mud and sediments into the water and often deposit waste.

"No wonder calves consistently choose tank water over ponds when given a choice," Anderson said.

Reports show that the higher water quality found in tanks provides a boost in cattle gains. Calves can weigh an extra 50 pounds at weaning when tank water is available, and yearling steers can gain an extra three- to four-tenths of a pound per day. With this much added performance, pumping water into tanks can pay off in just a few years and offers an even more immediate payoff in the case of dried up ponds.

Another related way producers can adjust to water shortages, according to Anderson, is to grow limited irrigation forages rather than a grain crop. Many irrigated acres may not receive enough water this summer to grow a good grain or root crop.

“Sometimes you can combine water allocated for several fields onto one field to get a crop, but that still leaves the other acres with little or no water at all,” Anderson explained.

Forage crops also need water for highest production, but at least some useful yield can be gathered when total water available is very low. A perennial forage would eliminate the cost and time of establishing a new crop if water limits continue for several more years.

According to Anderson, switchgrass is one good choice. It’s less expensive to plant, its primary water needs occur in early summer when water usually is available, and it can be managed for hay or pasture. Other warm-season grass options include big or sand bluestem and indiangrass.

“It may not be what you hoped for, but growing forages under limited irrigation may help you make the best out of a bad situation.”