The weather has been in the forefront this summer. While we have had a wet, cool summer, the rest of the United States has roasted under record heat and dry weather. The word is out that 2013 is not going to be a cheap food year. Food prices are up now and are forecast to rise even higher.

Planning ahead can help you to keep your grocery bill low. But what foods does it make sense to stockpile?

Wheat products are high on the list. The drought has wiped out a good portion of America’s wheat supplies. Stock up on flour, cereal, dried pasta, bread, tortillas and crackers.

More than 88 percent of the nation’s corn crop is also in drought areas. Cornmeal, cornstarch, popcorn and any food that contains corn syrup should be on your list and in your pantry.

Cows are producing less milk because of the current high temperatures. The milk they are producing contains less fat and protein than usual. High heat causes cows to drink more water and eat less food, so it’s going to take a lot more milk to produce products like cheese. Stockpile: cheese, powdered milk, powdered buttermilk, sweetened condensed milk, evaporated milk, butter and eggs.

Meats are another expensive part of our food budget. Since corn is going to be in short supply, we are going to have a lack of animal feed. Meat prices are likely to spike. Right now, you may be seeing a small dip in beef prices. Many farmers are choosing to send cattle to slaughter, rather than continue to feed them, so there will be a short-term dip in prices as the market gets flooded with meat. But the other shoe will soon drop and there will be a sharp increase in meat prices. Buy fresh meat, canned meat and chicken.

Fruits, vegetables and legumes will soon rise in cost. Higher than normal temperatures and below normal rainfall have slowed plant production, and destroyed many crops.
Now is the time to stock up on fruits and vegetables. Look for fresh, frozen, canned and dried forms. What is already in the stores will be lower than those that are yet to be harvested. Tomato products that are canned and bottled are a great bargain right now. Stock up on tomato sauce, paste and salsa. Beans are always a bargain, so stock up with dried and canned beans. The dried form in particular will be good for many more years.

If you are a fan of soy, you should know that 87 percent of the soybean crop is in drought areas. Get soy milk, soy sauce and other products that contain soy.

The trick to stocking up on products is to make sure that they have a long shelf life. Stockpiling is easy to overdo. Before you go nuts and buy 500 pounds of flour, spend some time evaluating your actual needs. It's important to keep expiration dates in mind. You won't save any money by buying more than you can use and letting it go to waste.

How long does stored food last? Here are some general guidelines:

- Uncooked meat lasts from six to nine months; the thinner the product, the shorter the shelf life. Steaks can be held for six months, roasts for nine. Of course, proper wrapping before freezing is necessary.
- Cheese can be kept from one to six months. The harder the cheese, the longer the storage life. Cream cheese lasts only one month, but cheddar lasts as much as six months.
- Cereals can be stored for six months.
- Flour can be kept as long as a year. Whole wheat flour has a shorter storage life than white flour.
- Rice and pasta can be kept up to two years.
- White sugar is good for two years, but keep your brown sugar for no more than four months (it gets hard).
- Commercially frozen fruits will last up to a year in your freezer. Commercially frozen vegetables have a lifespan of only eight months.
- Canned vegetables can last two to three years, but fruit only 12 to 18 months.
- Dried beans kept free from moisture can last for several years. This is an excellent way to stretch your money, plus beans are full of protein for healthy eating.

If you have questions about how long foods can be stored, give us a call here at Cooperative Extension. We’ll be glad to answer your questions.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

- 30 -