

# ***COW/CALF CORNER***

## ***The Newsletter***

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## **Life After the Drought for Oklahoma Cow-Calf Producers**

By Derrell S. Peel

After two years of extremely dry conditions, the drought in Oklahoma, for the foreseeable future, has abated. Most of Oklahoma has received ten to twenty percent above normal precipitation in the last 90 days. In fact, locally heavy rains have made flooding a serious concern in several regions and the 2007 wheat harvest is struggling to get moving with persistent rainy conditions. However, cow-calf producers, for the most part, are enjoying the best forage and pond water conditions in many months and are not yet ready to complain about too much rain.

Cow-calf producers have a number of considerations for recovery from the drought and planning for the next couple of years. The first priority is or should be, for many producers, to assess forage conditions. Many pastures suffered in the drought and need time to recover. Producers should evaluate weed and brush control and especially fertility. Although fertilizer is expensive, many pastures need time and nutrients to recover and producers should carefully manage stocking rates to allow pastures to recuperate. Producers are also looking to replenishing seriously depleted hay supplies. On May 1, Oklahoma hay stocks were down 27 percent from last year's already depleted levels and were down a whopping 71 percent from 2006 levels.

The cow herd likewise needs time to recuperate from the drought. Not only are cow numbers down in Oklahoma but very likely productivity has been reduced as well by the drought. The 2007 calf crop may well be smaller and even the 2008 calf crop may show some lingering effects of the drought on cow herd productivity. Producers need to evaluate the nutritional and reproductive status of cows and bulls to ensure productivity this next year. Early pregnancy checking may be advisable to identify lowered productivity sooner. Financial recovery from the drought depends on rebuilding herd productivity quickly.

The one positive effect of the drought is that herd expansion will be delayed and muted thereby

extending cyclically lowered levels of cattle production and supporting generally strong calf prices for another couple of years at least. Reductions in productivity and the suspension of heifer retention in 2006 ensure that feeder cattle supplies will remain tight in 2007. Better forage conditions will lead to resumption of heifer retention in the second half of 2007. After assessing forage production and current herd productivity, producers will once again be asking themselves how much expansion and how best to accomplish it. Breeding animal values are already increasing in Oklahoma and the question of how high is too high will soon be on producers' minds. The timing of cyclical expansion is key to how long good prices will last. And there are a host of other factors to watch as well, including grain prices, beef demand, trade and farm policy. The question "how the cattle cycle is proceeding" will have to be revisited later but suffice it so say that there will be herd expansion underway in Oklahoma for the remainder of 2007.

## **Look Back at the Calving Season and Start to Make Improvements Now**

By Glenn Selk

Only 1 to 2 months ago the spring calving cows were calving, the temperature was cold and the calving pastures were muddy. Experience would say that you do not want to ask cow calf operators how calving is then, because the response would be less than objective, reflecting bone-chilling cold and not enough sleep.

If you wait too long, perhaps until this fall, time will have mellowed most of the events and one soon has difficulty matching a calving season with particular problems. Now is perhaps the best time to make a few notes on what to change for next year.

The first step is to list the dead calves. Hopefully, your cattle are in a record system that will provide that information. If not, grab a piece of paper and pencil and list the calves. Your calving notebook should have the dead calves checked off and a brief notation on what happened to each. Until all the calves are listed, the shock of lost opportunities has not had its full impact.

Can you identify a pattern of problems?

Was most of the death loss right at delivery and involved two-year old heifers? This could indicate that sire selection needs to be done more carefully, with attention being paid to low birth weight EPD sires for heifers. Perhaps the heifers were underdeveloped. This could contribute to more calving difficulty than necessary. Do you provide assistance to heifers after they have been in stage II of labor for one hour?

Was the death loss more prevalent after the calves had reached 5 days to 2 weeks of age? This of course often means that calf diarrhea (or scours) is a major concern. Calf scours will be more likely to occur to calves from first calf heifers. Calves that receive inadequate amounts of colostrum within the first 6 hours of life are 5 to 6 times more likely to die from calf scours. Calves that are born to thin heifers are weakened at birth and receive less colostrum which compounds their likelihood of scours. Often, these same calves were born via a difficult delivery

and adds to the chances of getting sick and dying. All of this means that we need to re-assess the bred heifer growing program to assure that the heifers were in a body condition score of 6 (moderate flesh) at calving time.

Do you use the same trap or pasture each year for calving? There may be a buildup of bacteria or viruses that contribute to calf diarrhea in that pasture. This particular calving pasture may need a rest for the upcoming calving season. Plus it is always a good idea to get new calves and their mothers out of the calving pasture as soon as they can be moved comfortably to a new pasture to get them away from other potential calf scour organisms. An excellent discussion of a method used to reduce calf diarrhea is available from the University of Nebraska website. Go to this link: [http://vbms.unl.edu/extension/ext\\_beef.shtml](http://vbms.unl.edu/extension/ext_beef.shtml) online and learn more about the Nebraska Sandhill method of reducing calf scours.

Thanks to Dr. Kris Ringwall of North Dakota State University for this excellent suggestion to study the calf records now and start to make adjustments.

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