

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Winter Wheat Pasture Situation

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On January 1, USDA reported 1.75 million head of cattle grazing small grains pasture in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas, only 67 percent of the 2007 level. Feeder cattle prices have jumped sharply in the past two to three weeks, partly on recognition that feeder supplies are still cyclically tight, especially in the first half of 2008.

Mid-February is about the time that dual purpose wheat producers with grazing cattle start monitoring wheat for indications of first hollow stem, which signals the end of winter grazing. The average date of first hollow stem varies considerably from year to year and by wheat variety and usually occurs around March 1. However, the negative impact of grazing on wheat yield occurs quickly after first hollow stem and producers must be ready to remove cattle quickly. This is especially the case this year with high wheat price providing even more incentive for producers to protect wheat yields.

First hollow stem often produces a “run” of wheat pasture cattle anytime from late February through mid-March. This year the relatively small numbers of grazing cattle suggests that there will be much smaller than typical wheat pasture run. Moreover, wheat growth has been limited for many producers and some winter grazing cattle are beginning to show up at sales due to lack of forage. Thus, there may be even more smoothing of feeder cattle marketings over the next month compared to the typical bunching that often occurs.

Clearly, with the value of the wheat crop, there will be little interest in grazing out wheat until May. The only exceptions would be some producers who have problem fields that may choose to graze the wheat out as a part of weed control, especially if they have a summer crop opportunity. There are some wheat-rye mixes that are routinely grazed out but the numbers there are smaller than usual as well.

Three Keys to Planning the Spring Breeding Season

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

Three key management concepts can help commercial cow calf operations improve the productivity of their cow herds. However, planning and preparation must take place well in advance of the spring breeding season. The key areas to consider include: 1) assess the bull power; 2) immunize the replacement heifers properly; and 3) breed the replacement heifers ahead of the cows.

Lets examine each one briefly in more detail.

Bull power:

Do you have enough bulls to meet the needs of the cow herd? Very young, 12 month to 15 month old bulls should be placed with 10 – 15 females. Two year-old bulls can be placed with 18 – 24 females and experienced bulls should be able to breed 25 - 30 females or even a few more if in small breeding pastures. Have the bulls recently passed a breeding soundness examination? Arrange with your veterinarian a time to check the bulls for breeding soundness. Research has indicated that one of every six bulls will be questionable or unsatisfactory upon examination. It is important to find sub-fertile bulls in plenty of time to allow for the replacement bulls to be located and purchased for the upcoming breeding season. New bulls should be brought to their new environment about a month prior to breeding. This gives them an opportunity to become adapted to their new environment before the critical start of a breeding season.

Immunize the heifers:

Replacement heifers should be immunized for respiratory diseases such as IBR and BVD. If you choose to give the heifers a modified live vaccine for long-lasting protection against these viruses, heifers should receive this vaccination at least one month before the start of the breeding season. This would also be good time to include other reproductive disease protection that may be recommended by your veterinarian. Examples of other diseases that should be considered include leptospirosis and campylobacter (sometimes called vibriosis).

Breed the heifers ahead of the mature cows:

Yearling replacement heifers should be mated with bulls or bred artificially about 3 weeks to a month before the start of the breeding season for the mature cows. Breeding the heifers early is important for two reasons. Two-year old first calf cows normally take longer to return to heat cycles after calving than do older cows. Therefore if they calve early then when they rebreed they are in synchrony with the rest of the cows in the herd as they deliver their second calf. In addition, the manager can watch the heifers more closely early in the calving season and give them additional attention as they are the females most likely to need assistance at calving time.

Naturally, there are other health, nutritional, and management chores that must be attended to during the time prior to breeding, but using these three concepts would aid greatly in improving the productivity of many Oklahoma commercial cow calf herds.

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