

April 11, 2008

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

**The Newsletter**

**From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

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## **Cattle Producers Focus on Forage Use**

Derrell S. Peel, OSU Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

Oklahoma is once again demonstrating the fascinating geoclimatic diversity of the state. Most of Oklahoma is wet; in fact, Oklahoma Mesonet data rates the state on average as the sixth wettest for the year to date. However, it varies tremendously across the state. The southeast and northeast parts of the state are rated as the third wettest for the year to date while the Panhandle is rated as the 19th driest in the last 86 years. Much of the state (except the Panhandle) has received from one to seven inches of moisture in the past week and flooding is an issue in roughly half the counties of the state.

Things are greening up quickly around the state and many cattle producers are faced with decisions about fertilizer and other expensive inputs. The high cost of finishing cattle increases the value of forage based gains. However, cattle producers with improved forages that require substantial fertilizer are essentially competing with crop production for purchased inputs. Cattle production in this situation may not justify across the board fertilizer applications for pasture and hay production. On the other hand, the implications of reduced fertilization on the quantity and quality of summer forage, dry standing forage and hay should be carefully evaluated. Producers may need to consider carefully targeted fertilization of the best hay and pasture meadows and adjust stocking rates for reduced forage production on the remaining acres. There is not a single right answer for all producers and careful and thorough analysis is the only way to determine the best approach.

In contrast, producers utilizing native forages are in relatively better shape. Although high fuel costs means that producers operating over large areas should manage for reduced fuel consumption, the fact that they do not need large amounts of fertilizer leaves them in a relatively stronger competitive position for forage based cattle production. Despite high input costs, the general incentive for the cattle industry to emphasize forage based gains and minimize the competition for scarce grains.

All cattle producers should monitor feed markets, thinking ahead to winter supplement needs. Pasture management this summer can help to minimize supplemental feed needs next winter. Although feed prices are expected to remain high, it may make sense to book some feed needs earlier rather than later if weather threatens crop production this summer. Current grain price expectations hinge on a decent planting, growing and harvest conditions and there is more upside potential as a result of bad weather than there is downside potential from exceptionally good crop conditions. There is not much chance that any feed will look like a bargain but there will be some relative bargains for certain feeds at certain times. It is a volatile situation and it may not be clear what to do but producers should be prepared to act if an opportunity arises.

## **How Long Should I Leave the Bulls with Cows??**

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

Maintaining a 60 to 75 day breeding and calving season can be one of the most important management tools for cow calf producers. A uniform, heavier, and more valuable calf crop is one key reason for keeping the breeding season short. Plus, more efficient cow supplementation and cowherd health programs are a product of a short breeding season. This means putting the bull in a pasture or trap for 9 to 10 months of the year. Build a fence this summer that keeps the bull away from the cows and the replacement heifers after the breeding season.

This may be the summer to finally do something about that long breeding and calving season in some cow herds. Because we have very high feed and fertilizer prices, this is a time to reduce herd size to better fit the stocking rates required. **Reduced stocking rates will be necessary on improved pastures if lower amounts of fertilizer are applied.** Shortening the breeding season to 60 - 75 days and removing the bulls earlier this year should still result in a reasonable percentage of cows bred and identify those that are difficult to get bred so they may be removed from the herd next fall. Shortening the breeding and calving seasons will pay off in heavier, and more uniform groups of calves to sell at future weaning times. If a cow operation can market a sizeable number of calves together in one lot, they will realize a greater price per pound (on the average) than similar calves sold in singles or small lots. Proof of this concept is presented here in data from OSU and the University of Arizona.

Usable data were collected on 15,473 lots of feeder cattle sold at auction in eastern Oklahoma and Oklahoma City. Data were collected at 14 locations during October, 1997. The number of head in a sale had a significant positive effect on sale price. Lots with two or more steers sold for \$4.01-7.14/cwt over the price of similar steers sold as singles. (See Table 1 below; Smith, SC. et al. 1998. Effect of Selected Characteristics on the Sale Price of Feeder Cattle in Eastern Oklahoma. Extension Circular E-955. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University).

The premium for multiple head sale lots held for heifers was less, but held at about \$4.70/cwt. Multiple head lots that were not uniform sold for approximately \$2.00/cwt less than uniform lots for steers and heifers. A premium for uniform, multiple head lots is generally attributed to the convenience of filling orders for cattle of a specified description on the part of an order buyer. Also, larger, uniform lots may indicate a single point of origin for the cattle leading to less stress and fewer health problems as may be associated with pen of cattle put together.

**Table 1. Effect of Lot Size on Sale Price (\$/cwt) of Eastern Oklahoma Feeder Calves**

Lot Size	Steers Price Difference	Heifers Price Difference
1 head	Base	Base
2-5 head	+4.01	+3.17
6-10 head	+5.69	+4.31
>10 head	<b>+7.14</b>	+4.70

University of Arizona scientists (Gum and Daugherty, 1993. Arizona Rancher's Management Guide) recorded average sale prices of groups of feeder calves over a 7-year period and found that the average lot size was 15 head. If more calves were sold together, up to 5% more per pound was paid for calves in groups of 50 to 60 head. If groups of 5 head or less were sold, the calves brought 1 - 3% less than the average.

Small cow/calf operations can take advantage of these price differentials only by achieving 60 to 75 day breeding seasons so that the calves are born in a short period of time and are of similar age and weight at sale time. This stresses the need for cows to be in good body condition at calving and fertile bulls used only in short breeding seasons. However, many small producers lose all of these moneymaking advantages, just because they do not have a pen or trap that will hold the bull away from cows and heifers for 9 to 10 months of the year. In an effort to learn what others do to overcome this obstacle, we had an email conversation with a Clemson University beef cattle specialist who passed along the method of fencing that they use to separate bulls from their cows. They use a five strand, high tensile fence with the strands spaced at 10 inches apart. High tensile wire is a heavy gauge, smooth wire that can be made as a permanent system with in-line wire stretchers. The first strand is 10 inches above the ground. The end result is a fence that is 50 inches tall.

The fence, of course, must be electrically charged. A high voltage, low amperage fence energizer or charger provides the energy source. The Clemson design uses the 2nd, 3rd, and 5th wire as charged wires, with the first and the 4th wire attached to grounds. Other designs have the charged wires as numbers 1, 3, and 5. The grounds will be most effective if they are set deep into the soil. This will allow for good "grounding" even when summer droughts cause top soil to become quite dry. Different designs may fit different situations. Talking to a commercial representative from a reputable fencing supply company can be very helpful.

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