

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

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Down Sizing the Herd Due to High Costs?

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Producers, that choose to reduce inputs such as purchased feed and fertilizer for pastures, are also choosing to own and manage fewer cows. Removing cows from the herd would be slightly less painful if the prices received for them are at the yearly market top.

Oklahoma State University Agricultural Economists have plotted monthly averages for cull beef cows in the Southern Plains over a 10 year period of time (1997-2006). Cull cows sell for about 15% more per pound in June and July than in late October through November. Similar information is available at Iowa State University. Cull cows sold at Sioux Falls, Iowa brought 15% less per pound in the fall than they did in early summer.

Fall-calving cows can be weaned in late spring or early summer and culled at the yearly price peak. Fall-calvers that are not pregnant at weaning time would be “no-brainers”. They would be high on the cull list during the summer months. Fall-calvers that are re-bred may be a tougher decision, but if herd size reduction is necessary, then selling them now is a better option than later.

Spring-calving cows that are nursing a calf are difficult to part with at this time of year. Traditional patterns suggest that they be examined for culling next fall (when cull cows are the cheapest.) If the forage and feed costs dictate that some of them need to be sold now, then study the market situation carefully. What are cow/calf pairs selling for in your area? Would you be rewarded for selling the cow and calf separately? For example, last week an 1150 pound average dressing percent boner cow would sell for about 58 cents per pound or \$667. A 270 pound February-born calf would bring about \$1.35 per pound or \$364.50. The pair sold together would

need to sell for over \$1021 to justify selling them together. (Prices from USDA AMS Oklahoma City Weekly Narrative Cattle Summary for Week of May 26, 2008.)

It is important to remember that the biology of the cow does not change just because the economic situation has changed. The cow will continue to have the same needs for protein, energy, vitamins and minerals as cows did when gasoline was just a dollar per gallon.

Therefore, if we grow less grass (due to high fertilizer prices) and purchase less feed (due to high grain prices), we will need to reduce the number of cows that consume these resources.

Native Hay Quality versus Native Hay Quantity

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Harvest date is a very important factor that determines the quality of the hay cut from native grass meadows. Producers often strive for the best combination of quantity and quality of forage from the hay that they store for winter feed supplies. Research from Kansas State University range and pasture researchers sheds light on the optimum native range cutting dates. They harvested native grass meadows in early June, July, August, and September. The June and September dates were clearly less desirable as the June date produced about half as much tonnage as the early August cutting and the September hay quality was extremely low and produced a hay product that would be difficult for cattle to digest easily and yield little in terms of nutritional value. (Note that this data was derived from native hay, not introduced pastures such as bermudagrass, fescue, or old world bluestems.)

Therefore the decision of cutting time boiled down to the early July versus early August dates. The July harvest produced about 2400 pounds of dry matter forage per acre compared to 2800 pounds per acre in August. The July cutting was tested at about 7% crude protein and the August cutting was about half as good for protein content (3%).

As the calculations of amount of hay and quality are combined, we learn that the earlier cut hay produced about 168 pounds of crude protein per acre and the later cut hay produced only 84 pounds of crude protein per acre. Assuming typical total digestible nutrient (TDN) content for these hays, we would expect to find about 55% TDN in the July hay and 46% TDN in the August hay. Once again we make the calculations to see how much energy (TDN) is harvested to be fed to the cows. The July hay crop produced about 1320 pounds of TDN per acre and the August hay produced 1288 pounds of TDN per acre. Even though the producer hauled more tonnage from the field to the storage area and back out to the cattle with the later cut hay, he moved considerably less protein and energy than he would have if the hay had been cut one month earlier. No rancher likes to haul hay that badly. The high cost of fuel and labor suggests that hay harvesting should be done as productively as possible. If we are going to harvest and feed hay, we might as well have maximum protein and energy (the things the cows need) going along on the hay ride.

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