COW/CALF CORNER

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Winter Wheat Grazing: What a Difference a Year Makes

Derrell S. Peel, OSU Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

The contrast in market indications and producer expectations for winter wheat grazing in the Southern Plains could not be more dramatic than 2009 compared to last year. A quick review of the expectations as well as the outcomes from last year is useful.

At this time last year, wheat prices were very high, fertilizer prices were extremely high and seed was hard to find and expensive. Planting wheat early for forage requires extra seed and fertilizer. Research has shown that wheat grazing in Oklahoma reduces wheat yield an average of 5-6 bushel/acre. Thus, the cost of wheat for forage was high due to lost yield and high fertilizer and seed cost. Early planting increases the risk of crop failure and the need to replant. Most producers were focused on establishing the wheat crop and many faced financial limitations that made it difficult to plant once let alone face the prospect of replanting. The result was that most producers were not very interested in grazing wheat despite the fact that early budgets showed some potential for positive returns to the cattle. Of course, ultimately wheat and cattle markets both decreased sharply and the poor wheat crop resulted in an extremely disappointing year no matter what decisions were made.

Which brings us to August of 2009. Wheat and fertilizer prices are sharply lower and wheat (grain) production looks like a breakeven deal at best. The implied price of producing wheat forage is lower and can be expressed in terms of cattle grazing cost in the range of $0.28 - $0.32/pound of gain. Moreover, recent moisture and cooler temperatures across much of Oklahoma mean that the potential for wheat forage production this fall is quite good. Current winter stocker budgets suggest that returns to cattle could be in the range of $30 to $40 per head. This assumes that wheat pasture is valued at $0.40/lb of gain. This suggests another $20-25/head net return to the wheat forage, over the wheat forage cost of production above. Thus, a wheat producer grazing his own cattle has a potential total return to wheat and cattle of $50- $65/head. These returns depend on many assumptions on animal performance, medicine and veterinary cost, labor, interest and other costs and most importantly, the purchase price (beginning weight) and sale price (ending weight) of the cattle.

High demand for stocker calves this fall could push up calf prices relative to feeder prices. This would squeeze the margin and reduce the profit potential suggested above. It is also possible that both calf and feeder prices could increase between now and next spring if fed cattle prices improve, but this would have less impact on the buy-sell margin for stockers. Producers should think of managing the risk of winter grazing by protecting the margin between the buy and sell price of the cattle. Forward contracting purchases and hedging spring feeders is one of many ways to do that. Locking in either end by itself increases the risk of margin changes. The bottom line is that there is more interest in grazing wheat this year, more potential for returns but still plenty of risk that must be considered.

Preparing to "Pull" a Calf That Needs Assistance to be Born

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

The fall-calving season in upon us. Everyone hopes for very little if any calving difficulty. However, the realistic truth tells us that a few heifers or cows will need assistance at calving time. Before applying the obstetrical chains to "pull" a calf during a difficult birth, a proper analysis of the situation must be made. Wash the vulva, anus and the area in between using soap and warm water. Pulling on a calf should only be done when the presentation and posture of the calf are normal. “Normal” for most calves is defined as the "anterior presentation" with fore feet first, head resting on the limbs, and the eyes level with the knees. **Before chains are applied, be certain that the cervix is completely dilated.** Pulling on a calf before the cervix is properly dilated can lead to severe injury to the cow or heifer.

Before the calving season gets in full swing, a review of the possible scenarios would be helpful. To learn more about how to work with a difficult birth, purchase and watch ($24.95 each) two videos (VHS or DVD) available by contacting OSU Ag Communications Services at 405-744-4065. These two videos are called "Calving Management-Parturition" (VT-323) and "Calving Management-Dystocia" (VT-324). In the second video (VT-324), Larry Rice, DVM and OSU Professor-Emeritus, demonstrates how to check for cervical dilation.

Also download a copy of "Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers" E-1006, an OSU Extension Circular that thoroughly discusses working with cows and heifers before and during calving season. Know your own limitations. Call your local veterinarian for assistance soon in the calving process if you find a situation that is more difficult than you can handle in a short time.