COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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In this Issue:

Improving Forage Utilization and Performance of Yearlings Grazing Native Range During Late Summer

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Native range forage quality rapidly declines during mid-summer. As a consequence, stocker cattle and replacement heifer gains can fall from performance highs of 2 to 3 lb. per day during spring and early summer, to below one pound per day through the late summer grazing period. From a nutritional perspective, cattle perform to a level consistent with the most limiting nutrient in their diet. Protein concentration in native warm season grasses declines steadily throughout the summer months. In fact, by late June, protein concentration in this type of forage generally is the first limiting nutrient.

In several trials conducted at OSU with prairie hay harvested in mid-summer, forage intake was increased by 20 to 30% and digestibility was improved by 15 to 20% when cattle were supplemented

with one pound of a 38 to 41% protein supplement. This improvement in forage utilization results in increased weight gain of stocker cattle grazing summer pastures. Logically, this assumes that forage availability is adequate. A small quantity of high protein supplement will not improve weight gain if pastures are overgrazed. The following table summarizes research trials in which weight gain of non-supplemented calves was compared to weight gain of calves supplemented with .9 to 1.2 lb per day of 38 to 41% protein feed.

Summary of trials evaluating response of grazing cattle to protein supplement[a].

Initiation Date	Trial length, days	Initial Cattle Weight	Control ADG, Lb.	Sup. ADG, Lb.	Added Gain, Lb./day	Sup. Conversion, Lb. sup/Lb. added gain	OSU Animal Science Research Report Reference
7/16	96	580	1.44	1.88	.44	1.8	MP - 112, 1982
7/20	56	350	1.35	1.72	.37	2.2	MP - 114, 1983
7/20	62	616	1.06	1.39	.33	3.2	MP - 117, 1985
8/16	56	490	.83	1.32	.49	2.0	MP - 117, 1985
8/16[b]	57	440	.95	1.25	.30	3.3	MP - 117, 1985
7/16	84	645	.83	1.25	.42	2.9	MP - 118, 1986
5/25	84	365	1.48	1.75	.27	3.7	P - 939, 1994
Average	71	498	1.13	1.51	.37	2.7	

[a]Supplement amount ranged from .9 to 1.2 pounds per day and contained 38 to 41% crude protein on a dry matter basis. All supplements were formulated with soybean meal and/or cottonseed meal as the protein source.

[b]Forage base was bermuda grass pasture. All other studies utilized native range pastures.

Oklahoma Gold is a strategic supplementation program that is based on the principle of unlocking energy in the forage by providing a small amount of protein and a feed additive to improve forage utilization. The average protein supplement conversion from the trials summarized above was 2.7 lb. of supplement per pound of added gain. When energy supplements are fed, supplement conversions are often in the 8 - 10 lb. range. Cattle seem to respond well to this supplementation strategy when fed the

equivalent of one pound per day on an every other day basis (2 pounds per feeding). This adds flexibility to the program and greatly reduces the labor requirement.

Oklahoma Summer Grazing Issues and Winter Grazing Prospects

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A string of 100 degree days in August have proven once again how quickly Oklahoma summer can reduce an unusually wet July to typically dry late summer conditions. The good news is that ample moisture in the first half of the year have resulted in abundant forage production for grazing and hay. For most producers, the management challenges for the remainder of summer are not a lack of forage quantity but the rapidly deteriorating forage quality. The same is true in other regions as generally abundant forage quantity is losing quality rapidly with widespread heat across much of the southern half of the country. The other good news is that while forage is drying out rapidly, there are no widespread drought conditions anywhere in the country according to any of the broad based drought measures. At this late date, emerging drought conditions are likely to be short lived going into the fall. Of course there is no guarantee of fall moisture!

All of this raises questions of how it might impact the timing of both cattle marketings and demand in the fall. For cow-calf producers the situation is still probably better than average in terms of forage availability and I don't see current conditions leading to the need to wean and sell calves (or cull cows) earlier than usual. Summer stockers likewise have forage available but will see typical late summer decreases in performance unless strategic protein supplement is offered.

A crucial question arises about the intentions of wheat stocker producers this fall. Mother Nature will determine how early wheat can be planted based on moisture and soil temperature. Assuming that the possibility exists, how interested are wheat producers are in pursing early grazing? The wheat market is currently very volatile and could lead to more interest in wheat grain. There are some tradeoffs in early planted wheat in which grazing value that must be evaluated against grain yield reduction and increased risk of weed problems that result in steeper foreign matter and dockage discounts.

On the cattle side, strong stocker demand, especially early in the fall, could make stocker calves pricey relative to the budget realities. In the big picture, the 2010 calf crop is down another 1.2 percent from last year. Moreover, the estimated feeder supply on July 1 was down 2.6 percent year over year, on the heels of large feedlot placements in May and June. The bottom line is that stocker numbers will be tight in the second half of the year and could get even tighter if corn prices are low enough to keep feedlots aggressively placing cattle this fall. Stocker producers want to avoid chasing stocker cattle at prices they may not be able to live with come sale time. Paying too much for the stocker calves, in effect, makes the wheat pasture actually worth less than originally anticipated.