

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Drought Threat Looming Large in the Southern Plains

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It's time to talk about the dreaded D-word: drought. Moisture shortages continue to develop in the Southern Plains and the time for spring green-up is rapidly approaching. In Oklahoma, despite significant rain in some areas last week and two February snow storms, winter moisture

totals remain well below normal. All of the state is 80 percent or less of winter precipitation and much of the western half of the state is 40 percent or less of average winter precipitation.

Aside from winter wheat, which is suffering continued immediate stress, there is plenty of time to receive moisture for normal spring growth of pasture and hay. However, in another 30 days or so, the lack of moisture will have an abrupt and severe effect very quickly. Hopefully, rains will come and this article will not be needed. In fact, it often seems that an article on drought management has a similar effect as washing the car and provokes prompt arrival of rain. If that be the case this time, so much the better.

Nevertheless, while no one wants to talk about drought until there is no choice, the key to drought management is to plan ahead while there is still the maximum amount of management flexibility. Droughts that start at different times of the year vary considerably in how much and how fast the drought impacts are felt. A spring drought is probably the worst possible drought scenario for several reasons. First, a drought that preempts or greatly delays initial forage growth often results in forage quantity and quality issues that are not recovered for the entire grazing season. Secondly, many producers will finish the winter with limited hay reserves and when combined with the lack of standing forage, means that drought impacts are felt much sooner and more severely. Finally, both fall and spring calving cows are lactating and spring calving cows, especially, are more nutritionally vulnerable in the spring and early summer period. Lack of forage quantity and quality can quickly result in impacts on the current calf crop and compromise rebreeding performance with potential impacts on next year's calf crop.

The impacts of a continuing drought will be felt very quickly in April and May and will require timely and decisive action. Available management alternatives will depend on specific circumstances and, importantly, on a producer's objectives, which should be decided on early in the process to guide decisions. For example, fall calving cows may be looking at weaning slightly earlier than usual to avoid excessive loss of cow body condition and stretch limited feed supplies. Spring calving cows herds may face more critical decisions very quickly. If some hay or forage reserves are available it may be possible to stretch feed to get calves big enough to do very early weaning (perhaps mid-summer) and move calves to market or into a backgrounding program. The objective would be to try retain the core cow herd. The risk, of course, is that it could be a very long summer and the cost of supplemental feed would likely get prohibitive pretty quickly. The other alternative might be to sell some cow-calf pairs early and downsize to a minimal herd from which to rebuild after the drought.

There are many factors and circumstances that will determine what is feasible for different producers. The general rule, however, is always the same: don't keep more cows than you can maintain in good nutritional condition. Otherwise you are just extending the drought impacts into the post-drought period with poor reproductive performance. The problem now is that the potential of losing most or all of a grazing season leaves producers with relatively few options. The decision to sell is often the hardest but it is better to do it sooner rather than later. Markets for calves and cows are very strong now but might be impacted significantly if widespread drought persists. Most producers do not face critical decisions yet but they should plan now for the worst by determining when decisions will need to be made and what those decisions will be so that they have a plan to minimize the damage that persistent drought might bring.

The Early Returns Are In (2010 OQBN Results)

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A total of 7,537 Oklahoma Quality Beef Network (OQBN) calves were sold at ten value-added sales this past fall held at seven different Oklahoma livestock markets. The calves were sold in 851 lots from 177 producers for an average lot size of 9 head/lot. Sale prices of non-OQBN calves that went through the same livestock market the same day were compared to OQBN calves. The OQBN calves sold for \$7.84/cwt more than "run of the mill" non-preconditioned calves that sold the same day.

The sale day premium, however is not the whole story. The OQBN calves were weaned at least 45 days prior to sale. During this 45 days most calves will gain about 2 pounds per day. Therefore the OQBN calves weighed more than if they had been sold at a traditional weaning time. In addition, the market for 400 – 600 pound calves has historically been at the yearly lowest at conventional weaning dates in October and early November. By waiting the additional 45 days, the market improved dramatically this year adding a substantial dollar value to the OQBN calves as compared to the sale price that these same calves would have brought in October. Producers need to compare the value of the feed, labor, and health costs of the vac-45 OQBN program to differences in total sale price. In the fall of 2010, most producers sold the OQBN calves for enough more money to realize a worthwhile profit above the feed and health costs of the pre-conditioning program.

Other interesting findings from the OQBN data, indicated that “age and source” verification of all cattle was worth about \$1.00/cwt. The bonus due to “age and source” verification was stronger (about \$2.00/cwt) in heavier, older yearling cattle. Once again the value of larger lot size was apparent. Lots of 10 calves averaged about \$8.00/cwt more than similar calves sold 1 head at a time. This advantage increases up to truck-load size lots of 40 – 60 head where sale price increases were noted as much as \$12 - \$13 dollars/cwt as compared to similar cattle sold as singles. For more information about the Oklahoma Beef Quality Network go the website: <http://www.oqbn.okstate.edu/> .

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