

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

## **The Newsletter**

**From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

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## **Cow Slaughter and Herd Dynamics this Fall**

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

Cow slaughter continues at a pace well above last year in the Southern Plains. Beef cow slaughter in federal Region 6, which corresponds to the worst drought area, is averaging 150 percent of year ago levels for the past eight weeks. For the year to date, beef cow slaughter in the region is 123 percent above a year ago. Beef cow slaughter in all other regions for the year to date is down 6 percent, resulting in a total national beef cow slaughter that is 101 percent of last year. However, beef cow slaughter outside of Region 6 is 4.5 percent above year ago levels for the past eight weeks resulting in total beef cow slaughter higher last last year for the past few weeks.. Additionally, significant numbers of cows have moved out of Texas and Oklahoma to other regions, though it is hard to know how many cows have been relocated. All of this likely means that cow culling for the remainder of the year will not follow typical seasonal patterns both inside and outside of the drought areas.

In the drought regions, it seems clear that most of the cows normally culled for age or productivity reasons have long since moved to market and are part of the increased slaughter already documented. Additionally, many younger or still productive cows have also been sold, either to slaughter or to new owners in other regions along with some relocation of cows by owners in the drought region. This raises the question of what to expect in the drought area for the remainder of the year. Though most of the normally culled cows have already been sold, continued dry conditions will presumably force additional cow liquidation through the fall. One would presume that most producers have by now determined if it is feasible to keep cows

through the winter or not and that additional movements might be at a slower pace than summer levels. However, there are reports that pregnancy evaluations are, in some cases, showing significantly reduced pregnancy rates due to the effects of the drought and this may lead to some additional culling this fall.

Drought liquidation may have an impact on beef herd culling in other regions for the remainder of the year. Beef cow slaughter in regions outside the drought area is also up the past eight weeks. Forage conditions in most of the rest of the country have ranged from very good to average and increased slaughter is likely not the result of poor forage conditions. However, the movement of drought region cows into other regions may be changing normal culling patterns. Producers with good forage may be culling early to take advantage of the opportunity to trade out cull cows for young cows from the drought zone or take in lease cows needing a new home. Additionally, many heifers held for replacement in the drought region have also been liquidated making more replacements available to producers in other regions. The availability of heifers and breeding cows from the drought area may help accelerate the herd expansion already in place in northern regions of the country.

The drought ensures that beef cow slaughter this year will be close to, or perhaps above, year ago levels on a national basis. The total beef cow herd will decrease by 2-3 percent this year. The regional impacts will be much more dramatic with herd growth likely in the Northern Plains and northern Rocky Mountain regions and double digit reductions in herds in Texas and Oklahoma.

## **Strategies for Cow Herds with Short Hay Supplies**

Dr. Dave Lalman, Oklahoma State University Beef Extension Specialist

This year's historical drought has forced cattle producers in the Southern Great Plains to liquidate a portion or all of their cattle, begin feeding months ahead of their normal winter feeding schedule, ship cows to grass somewhere North or East, purchase marginal or low quality hay from hundreds of miles away, and deal with a higher percentage of open cows due to the extreme summer heat. Like never before, this is the winter feeding season to consider ways to improve efficiency of harvested forage use. And fortunately, there are a few relatively simple concepts or strategies that when combined could result the need for only about 2/3 of the hay most of us think we need.

Possible strategies include:

### **1) Limit feeding hay.**

By limiting forage intake, forage digestibility should increase and waste should go down. This can be accomplished by feeding a predetermined amount of around 75% of what the cattle would normally consume. This can be accomplished by rolling out the appropriate amount of round baled hay every day or flaking off big square bales. Another option is to place hay in feeders in a dry lot where cattle can be allowed access to the hay for about 6 hours. Research shows that 6 hours of access to hay reduces forage intake to about 75% of normal. This program should only be used with good quality grass hay and is not recommended for first calf heifers or thin, older cows. The better quality the hay, the better this program will likely work. Limiting access to extremely low quality forage may exacerbate weight loss.

### **2) Using hay feeders designed to limit hay waste.**

If producers are using round bale hay feeders, be sure to select/purchase a model with a sheeted (solid) bottom. Open bottom hay feeders have been shown to waste as much as 21% of the original bale weight! The sheeted bottom should reduce waste to around 12-13%. Using a cone style feeder or modified cone feeder with a sheeted bottom should reduce waste to around 5-6% of the original bale weight.

### **3) Using an Ionophore (feed additive).**

Finally, consider using an ionophore for grazing cattle and cattle consuming hay. Older research has shown that Rumensin and Bovatec improves weight gain of growing cattle. Rumensin is approved for the use in mature beef cows. Older research showed that Rumensin reduced hay intake by around 10% while still producing about the same amount of weight gain. In a recent study in our shop at Oklahoma State University, cows fed 200 mg of Rumensin gained an additional 0.5 pound per head per day and nearly one half a body condition score unit more during a 58 day study. Importantly in this project, the forage digestibility was improved dramatically, resulting in the improved cow performance. One could look at the addition of Rumensin in the supplement as having increased the net energy value of this low quality hay diet by about 15%. In other words, less of the same diet (hay) would need to be fed to get the same performance. In our region, the cost of Rumensin is ONLY ABOUT \$0.02 per cow per day! I don't know any other way to get that much improvement in forage utilization at such a low cost. There is a reason why the cattle feeding industry has been using this feed technology so well for so long, and a substantial improvement in feed efficiency is it. That improvement is available to the cow/calf industry as well.

## **When Do We Intervene and Assist a Cow or Heifer in Labor?**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Fall calving season is upon the Oklahoma ranches that have fall calving. An issue facing the rancher at calving time, is the amount of time heifers or cows are allowed to be in labor before assistance is given. Traditional text books, fact sheets and magazine articles stated that "Stage II" of labor lasted from 2 to 4 hours. "Stage II" is defined as that portion of the birthing process from the first appearance of the water bag until the baby calf is delivered. Newer data from Oklahoma State University and the USDA experiment station at Miles City, Montana clearly show that Stage II is much shorter, lasting approximately 60 minutes in first calf heifers, and 30 minutes in mature cows.

Table 1. Research Results of Length of Stage II of Parturition

Source	No. of Animals	Length of Stage II
USDA (Doornbos, et al.1984. JAS:59:1)	24 mature cows	22.5 min.
USDA (Doornbos, et al.1984. JAS:59:1)	32 first calf heifers	54.1 min.

Oklahoma State Univ. (Putnam, et al. 1985. Therio:24:385)	32 first calf heifers	55.0 min.
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In these studies, heifers that were in stage II of labor much more than one hour or cows that were in stage II much more than 30 minutes definitely needed assistance. Research information also shows that calves from prolonged deliveries are weaker and more disease prone, even if born alive. In addition, cows or heifers with prolonged deliveries return to heat later and are less likely to be bred for the next calf crop. Consequently a good rule of thumb: If the heifer is not making significant progress 1 hour after the water bag or feet appear, examine the heifer to see if you can provide assistance. Mature cows should be watched for only 30 minutes before a rectal examine is conducted. If you cannot safely deliver the calf yourself at this time, call your local veterinarian immediately.

Most ranches develop heifers fully, and use calving ease bulls to prevent calving difficulties. However, a few difficult births are going to occur each calving season. Using the concept of evening feeding to get more heifers calving in daylight, and giving assistance early will save a few more calves, and result in healthier more productive two-year cows to rebreed next year.

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