

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

## **The Newsletter**

**From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

**October 31, 2011**

### **In this Issue:**

#### **Cattle Producers Prepare for Another Dry Winter**

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

#### **Sorting Cows for More Efficient Winter Supplemental Feeding**

Dr. Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

## **Cattle Producers Prepare for Another Dry Winter**

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

The last 30 days has brought significant rainfall to parts of Oklahoma. Much of the central and south central parts of the state have received very timely rains with respect to wheat production. Winter wheat planting is about on track compared to normal at this time of the year. Some was dry planted earlier and some is just now being planted. However, wheat emergence is below normal for this date and last week, 42 percent of the Oklahoma wheat crop was rated fair with 32 percent good and 4 percent excellent. This confirms that the wheat crop is late and will result in little grazing potential for the remainder of 2011. Depending on winter weather and additional moisture, there may be limited grazing potential after January 1. All of this is to say that winter wheat will provide little fall forage. To the extent that any wheat grazing potential develops through the winter, the wheat is likely to be used mostly for cows rather than for stockers.

Most cattle producers by now probably know their situation for the winter. I imagine that most producers have reduced cattle numbers enough to match forage supplies and have made arrangements for most of the purchased feeds they will need. As a result I expect that drought forced movement of cattle will slow down through the normal cow culling period of the next three weeks or so. Oklahoma auction totals for cows and bulls are still well above year ago levels the past three weeks but have dropped significantly from the extremely high levels seen in August and September. While lack of feed will likely result in some continued movement of cattle, it is water availability that may be the most critical factor for producers in getting through the winter. Cooler weather will help stretch remaining water supplies and may reduce some of the water quality problems associated with warm weather. However, overall water supplies will continue to tighten without one or more heavy rainfall events to replenish stock ponds.

There are a number of management factors that cow-calf producers should undertake to prepare for winter. Hopefully, producers have already completed pregnancy examinations to ensure that any cows kept through the winter will indeed produce a calf. Many producers are using purchased forages that are highly variable in quality and producers need to carefully manage the nutritional status of cows to manage feed costs and simultaneously ensure the viability of next year's calves and cow rebreeding potential. Dried up ponds may provide an opportunity for pond management if cleaning or other pond structure maintenance is needed. High cattle prices continue to provoke cattle thefts and producers should carefully monitor cattle. Hay supplies likewise should be monitored against theft and against fire danger that will grow through the winter.

Adverse situations always seem to bring out the best and the worst in people. There are many, many examples of neighbors helping neighbors in this drought and oftentimes those neighbors are people several states away that have never met. However, there are already numerous reports of unethical dealings, especially with respect to feed sales. My travels recently confirm that there is still a steady stream of trucks moving hay from north to south in the Plains. Many deals are made over the phone and buyers, out of desperation and a generally trusting nature are sometimes being taken advantage of. Issues range from poor quality hay being misrepresented as to quality; to truckloads of hay being watered down and arriving at the destination with 25-30 percent moisture and a huge shipping bill. There have been some reports of feeds being extended with sawdust and other fillers and masked with molasses. No doubt these problems will get worse as we move through the winter and feed supplies dwindle. It is definitely buyer beware and producers buying feed need to be careful to use good business practices and common sense in purchasing feed. Feed and forage testing is cheap insurance against the investment producers are making in feed to maintain cows through this drought. Most of the really good deals on feed really are not good deals. Nowhere is the old adage more true than in this situation: if it seems too good to be true it probably is.

## **Sorting Cows for More Efficient Winter Supplemental Feeding**

Dr. Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Cow calf producers in the Southern Plains are searching for every management strategy that will improve the efficiency of the feeding program for their cow herds. Drought-shortened pastures and reduced and/or expensive hay supplies mean that feed wastage must be eliminated. Putting just the right amount of forage and supplement in front of the cows according to their needs will be most important this winter.

First calf heifers have historically been the toughest females on the ranch to get rebred. They are being asked to continue to grow, produce milk, repair the reproductive tract, and have enough stored body energy (fat) to return to heat cycles in a short time frame. Two-year old cows must fill all of these energy demands at a time when their mouth is going through the transition from baby teeth to adult teeth.

If these young cows are pastured with the larger, older cows in the herd, they very likely will be pushed aside when the supplements are being fed in the bunk or on the ground. The result of these adverse conditions for young cows very often is a lack of feed intake and lowered body condition. Of course, lowered body condition in turn results in delayed return to heat cycles and a later calf crop or smaller calf crop the following year.

North Dakota State University data of commercial cow herds recorded over a 21 year period illustrated the differences in size and body condition of very young cows and the very mature (10 year old+) cows. The North Dakota data clearly showed that the average 2 year old is about 20% smaller than her full grown herd mates. There is little wonder that the younger cows get pushed away from feed bunks, hay racks, or supplements fed on the ground. The results of the size differences and the need to continue to grow are manifest in the lower body condition scores noted in the very young cows. The very old cows are experiencing decline in dental soundness that make it difficult for them to maintain feed intake and therefore body condition. Over the 21 year data set from North Dakota, the 2-year old cows and the 11 year-old and older were significantly lower (0.3 or more units) in body condition score than middle-age cows.

Consequently, it makes sense to sort very young cows with the very old cows (*if not already culled*) and provide them with a better opportunity to compete for the feed supplies. By doing so, the rancher can improve the re-breeding percentages in the young cows and keep the very old cows from becoming too thin before culling time. From this data they formulated three logical groups of cows to be pastured together for feeding efficiency:

Group 1: The two-year old first calf heifers. They have higher nutrient needs than other cows that are not growing. They are too small to compete with larger, older, boss cows for the supplement.

Group 2: The old cows (10 years and older) and the 2nd calf heifers. In addition, this group should include any of the middle aged cows that were thin and needed extra supplement. Cows that were Body Condition Score 4 or less would be considered.

Group 3: The remaining cow herd. This is the group that is mature in size and in adequate condition to enter the winter feeding period as at least Body Condition Score 5.

If only two groups are possible, putting groups 1 and 2 together would be the logical other combination. Ranchers, then want to be certain that the feeding program is adequate to have cows in each group calve as BCS 5 or 6 next spring.

