COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Drought or Not, Southern Plains Faces Challenges in 2012

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November and December moisture means that some areas of the Southern Plains are in better shape than this time last year, at least as far as soil moisture. Nevertheless, the region is still in drought and it is still very much a question of what the region will look like when the growing season begins in the spring. Recent weather has been moisture free and current forecasts show that dry and warm conditions are expected for the foreseeable future. The current weather pattern appears to be more consistent with the La Niña conditions that are expected according to the latest seasonal drought outlook from the Climate Prediction Center, which indicates a likelihood of persistent drought for the period through the end of March at least.

Producers who sold many or all of their cattle in 2011 are waiting to see if the drought abates in 2012 and should be developing a rebuilding strategy that can be activated in the spring if conditions improve. Significant reduction in drought conditions will likely lead to rapid and strong demand for breeding animals and extremely high prices are likely. Producers need to plan for both forage recovery and cattle market conditions in terms of exactly how and how fast to rebuild cow herds. There will likely not be enough bred cows or cow-calf pairs to meet demand in the region and a slower strategy utilizing stockers to sell or stocker heifers as replacements may be attractive to some producers.

Producers who maintained cows through the winter face even more financial and management challenges in 2012. Many producers with cows are operating with purchased feed and in many cases, minimal supplies to get through the winter. These producers are gambling that the drought will abate and the investment in feed to carry cows through the winter will pay off by

having less need to repurchase cows in 2012. There are two parts to this gamble. First, cows that have been nutritionally challenged through much of 2011 and into spring of 2012 are very vulnerable to reduced reproductive performance. It is vital that the investment in feed to maintain cows is done at a level that ensures that cows remain in decent shape to rebreed in 2012. Otherwise, the costs of the drought are merely postponed until later.

The second part of the gamble of holding cows this winter is that the drought may not abate and spring arrives dry like it did last year. In that circumstance, producers will face immediate and critical decisions much earlier than last year. Having already invested in considerable feed, producer will have to decide if more feed is simply throwing good money after bad. Continued drought will no doubt lead to another big round of cow culling and will occur much earlier than in 2011. The need to cull could coincide with spring calving and producers will have few options other than to sell heavy bred cows or cow-calf pairs. Many calves will be too small to early wean as was done in 2011. Producers should develop a plan for the spring now. Evaluate feed and financial resources and determine what alternatives are available and dates at which decisions must be made.

Severity of Winter and Calf Birth Weights

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Does the severity (coldness or mildness) of the winter have an impact on spring-born calf birth weights? Ranchers have asked that question during many springs and veterinarians have speculated for years. The debate rages on! This is obviously a difficult subject to research because you cannot have a "control" group of cows to compare to a "treatment" group that is exposed to a cold winter while still grazing on the same pasture. **Therefore research data on this subject is limited.** University of Nebraska researchers have done the next best thing. They have monitored the birth weights of genetically similar calves across three different winters and have related average winter temperatures to birth weights. This research is reported in detail in the 1996 University of Nebraska Animal Science Research Report (Coburn, et al.) A 3-year study was conducted to evaluate effects of high and low air temperatures and wind chills during winter months on subsequent calf birth weights and calving difficulty of spring-born calves. Records on approximately 400 2-year-old heifers and their calves were used. Heifer and calf genetics were the same each year. Heifers were fed similar quality hay free choice each year before calving. High temperatures during the 1994-95 winter were 9 degrees higher than during the 1992-93 winter. The low temperatures were five degrees higher for 1994-95 compared to 1992-93. The greatest differences in monthly temperatures between years were found during December, January and February. Average temperatures for these three months increased 11 degrees F. over the three years. Average calf birth weights decreased 11 pounds (81 to 70) from 1993 to 1995. A 1:1 ratio was observed. Although calving difficulty was high due to the research design, it also decreased from 57% to 35% from 1993 to 1995. Results indicate that cold temperatures influenced calf birth weight.

Other data that may shed some light on this subject, comes from OSU in 1990. Birth weights of 172 fall born calves and 242 spring born calves were compared. These calves were the result of AI matings using the same bulls and bred to similar

crossbred cows. The fall born calves averaged 4.5 pounds lighter at birth than their spring-born counter parts (77.7 pounds versus 82.2 pounds). One possible explanation for this phenomenon, the changing of blood flow patterns of cows gestating in hot weather versus cold weather. During hot weather blood is shunted away from internal organs toward outer extremities to dissipate heat, while the opposite is the case in very cold weather with blood flow directed toward internal organs in an effort to conserve heat and maintain body temperature. This change in maternal blood flow may impact fetal growth in a small way, but result in a measurable difference.

Weather cannot be controlled; however, with (thus far) above average winter temperatures, normal to slightly lower birth weights hopefully will bring less calving difficulty this spring. **If** the colder temperatures arrive during late gestation, that may be a clue that birth weights may be slightly increased and require a watchful eye for calving difficulty.

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