

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Drought and Herd Rebuilding in 2012

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Many producers in the Southern Plains are still in a holding pattern to see what they will be able to do this spring. There are several factors that will determine whether and to what extent herd rebuilding will begin this year. The first is, of course, whether drought conditions renew this spring. At the current time, much of Oklahoma has good soil moisture conditions. Temperatures are generally above normal and things will begin to green up soon with these conditions. However, typical strong winds are common and fire danger is running high as soil and vegetation dry out quickly. The next month will be critical in determining the potential for

spring forage growth.

The next level of consideration is what forage growth will occur assuming that drought is not a limiting factor. The amount of forage damage from the drought last year is yet to be determined in many cases and will depend on a variety of factors including the location, type of forage and condition of the range or pasture going into the drought. There are indications however that there is significant death loss in forage, particularly farther west and in native pastures. The amount of forage production in 2012 is likely to be significantly reduced for one to three years and careful management will be needed to ensure recovery of pastures. Stocking rates will be sharply reduced and stocking seasons need to be carefully managed to avoid additional damage to pastures and ranges.

The final factor affecting herd rebuilding will be the economic and financial factors. Replacement female markets in Oklahoma are still significantly below bred cow and heifer markets farther north. However, these markets are beginning to increase and may increase more sharply in the next 4-6 weeks if forage conditions look promising. A look at markets farther north is likely an indication of things to come in the southern plains. Markets for bred heifers and cows have been higher in the central and northern plains for some time. Recently, feeder heifer markets are beginning to show unusual but anticipated behavior. Several markets in Nebraska and South Dakota have recently reported heifer prices that are equal to or higher than prices for comparable weight steers. Market reporters are generally designating these heifers as replacements (though they are unbred and selling in feeder auctions) to distinguish them from feeder heifers destined for feedlots. In some cases these heifers for replacements are bringing up to \$20/cwt. higher than comparable weight feeder heifers. In at least one case, the market report is showing replacement heifers sold on a per head basis intermingled with normal feeder animals prices reported on a price per cwt. basis.

With favorable forage conditions, cow markets in the southern plains are likely to increase further. Cull cow markets will provide a floor for breeding female markets and cull cow prices continue to increase as well. Slaughter cows are already priced in the upper \$80/cwt range to nearly \$100/cwt at the upper end. Cull cow prices will likely average in the \$90-100/cwt. range in the next few weeks. Bred cow and cow-calf pair prices are expected to strengthen with weather being a determinant of how much strength is likely. Feeder heifers will likely be increasingly dominated by the replacement value and will be priced closer to or perhaps above feeder steer values at times.

Try to Avoid Body Condition Loss Now

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The winter of 2011-2012 has brought challenges in the form of very high feed prices, and in some instances, short hay supplies. Cows in many Midwestern herds are calving in marginal body condition. Unfortunately, this is a season where maintaining or gaining body condition on spring calving cows is really quite difficult. Warm season grasses have not yet begun to grow. Dormant grass (what little is left) is a low quality feed. Cows cannot, or will not, consume a large amount of standing dormant grass at this time year. If the only supplement being fed is a self-fed, self-limited protein source, the cows may become very deficient in energy. Remember, the instructions that accompany these self-fed supplements. They are to be fed along with free choice access to adequate quality forages.

There is another factor that compounds the problem. A small amount of winter annual grasses may begin to grow in native pastures. These are the first tastes of green grass many cows have seen since last summer. The cows may try to forage these high moisture, low energy density grasses, in lieu of more energy dense hays or cubes. **The sad result is the loss of body condition in early lactation beef cows just before the breeding season is about to begin.**

Body condition at the time of calving is the most important factor affecting rebreeding performance of normally managed beef cows. Nonetheless, condition changes after calving will have more subtle effects on rebreeding especially in cows that are in marginal body condition. Body condition changes from the time the cow calves until she begins the breeding season can play a significant role in the rebreeding success story. This appears to be most important to those cows that calve in the marginal body condition score range of "4" or "5". An Oklahoma trial illustrates the vulnerability of cows that calve in the body condition score of 5. Two groups of cows began the winter feeding period in similar body condition and calved in very similar body condition. However, after calving and before the breeding season began, one group was allowed to lose almost one full condition score. The other group of cows was fed adequately to maintain the body condition that they had prior to calving. The difference in rebreeding rate was dramatic (73% vs 94%). Again this illustrates that cows that calve in the body condition score of 5 are very vulnerable to weather and suckling intensity stresses and ranchers must use good nutritional strategies after calving to avoid disastrous rebreeding performance.

Figure 1. Change in body condition after calving influences rebreeding rates. Cows that maintain body condition (yellow line) had a rebreeding rate of 94%. Cows that lost body

condition after calving (red line) had a rebreeding rate of 73% (Wettemann, et al., 1987 Journ. Animal Sci., Suppl. 1:63).



Cows should calve in moderate to good condition (scores of 5 or 6) to ensure good rebreeding efficiency. Ideally, cows should be maintaining condition during mid to late pregnancy and gaining during breeding. The goal of the management program should be to achieve these body conditions by making maximum use of the available forage resource.

Continue feeding a source of energy, such as moderate to good quality grass hay free choice and/or high energy cubes until the warm season grasses grow enough to provide both the energy and protein that the lactating cows need. Yes, the feed is high-priced. But the cost of losing 21% of next year's calf crop is even greater!

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