

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

The Newsletter

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## **2012 Beef Cow Slaughter Shows Less Drought Impact...and More?**

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

Beef cow slaughter so far this year is down over 9 percent compared to the same period last year. In the last 6 weeks, beef cow slaughter is down nearly 16 percent compared to last year. These data clearly reflect improved drought conditions compared to last year, especially in the Southern Plains. So far this year, beef cow slaughter in federal slaughter Region 6, which covers the 2011 drought region, is down over 19 percent compared to all other slaughter regions in which the remaining beef cow slaughter is down 5.2 percent. In the last 6 weeks, Region 6 beef cow slaughter is down nearly 31 percent year over year while the rest of the country is down nearly 9 percent.

Last year, the situation in the Southern Plains was in sharp contrast to the rest of the country. At this time last year, the year to date total beef cow slaughter for Region 6 was up 12 percent from the same period in 2010, while the rest of the country was down 11 percent leading to a national total that was down nearly five percent. In other words, last year at this time, the growing drought impacts were offsetting decreased beef cow slaughter in other regions which reflected industry attempts to stabilize or increase beef cow numbers. Of course, the drought won the day last year and by the end of the year, the 21 percent annual increase in Region 6 beef cow slaughter more than offset the one percent decrease in the rest of the country and resulted in an annual increase in beef cow slaughter of nearly 5 percent. So far this year, region 6 and the rest of the country are acting consistently with decreased beef cow slaughter in all regions. In fact, Region 6 is leading the pack with the total decrease in beef cow slaughter in the region down more than twice as much as slaughter numbers were up in the region at this time last year.

The summer period will be critical as the majority of the drought culling last year occurred in the late June – September period. In 2011, Region 6 beef cow slaughter in this summer period was up over 32 percent from 2010. Given the comparisons so far this year to last year, year over year decreases in Region 6 beef cow slaughter of 35 to 45 percent could occur for several weeks, if not the average of the entire summer period. Beef cow slaughter decreases of this magnitude will help pull national beef cow slaughter down even more into double digit decreases compared to last year.

The year over year decreases in beef cow slaughter in Region 6, as well as the rest of the country, suggest that industry is not only offsetting last year's drought enhanced slaughter rates but additionally represent decreased slaughter consistent with attempts to at least stop herd liquidation. The limited number of replacement heifers available makes herd expansion possibilities remote, at best, this year. Decreased cow slaughter of roughly 18-20 percent on an annual basis is needed this year to avoid additional net beef herd liquidation. The current pace of decreased beef cow slaughter suggests liquidation could stop or be reduced to a minimal level this year. However, recent deterioration of pasture and range conditions across several regions could easily lead to reduced heifer retention and moderation of beef cow slaughter decreases. A

few weeks of dry conditions could push the beef industry back into herd liquidation and postpone heifer retention another year.

## **Don't Get Caught By Surprise**

Dave Sparks DVM, Oklahoma State University Area Extension Veterinarian

It is easy to be taken by surprise by anaplasmosis. Although the problem can occur any time, it is usually most prevalent in the mid to late summer. This is a time when many stockmen are busy in the hay fields or with other projects and are not checking their cows every day like they do during winter feeding. This year, however, anaplasmosis season is likely to come early due to the influence of a mild winter and early spring on the insect vectors that carry the disease.

Anaplasmosis is caused by a single cell parasite that lives inside the cow's red blood cell. When the immune system recognizes the problem it destroys the parasite, but unfortunately destroys the red blood cell at the same time. When a significant number of red blood cells have been destroyed anemia results and weight loss, abortion and death occur. The parasite can infect calves but cattle less than one year of age will not usually show symptoms. Cattle between one and 3 years may show mild to moderate symptoms of the disease, but death rarely occurs in cows less than three years of age. Biting insects such as horse flies and ticks carry the organism from infected or recovered carrier cows to healthy cattle. In this type of transfer it is common to see one cow with the disease, followed a few weeks later by an outbreak of several more cows that were infected from the original case. The organism can also be spread by blood on needles, ear taggers, dehorner, or other instruments. This type of transfer typically results in an outbreak of several cases simultaneously.

Although oxytetracycline is an effective treatment, in many cases by the time that the disease is seen and diagnosed, the anemia is so severe that gathering and treating the animal can result in death due to lack of oxygen. Active cases should be isolated, but in some cases it is better to move the healthy animals than to stress the infected cow. The best course of action is a good preventative program. Feeding a mineral supplement that contains chlortetracycline is effective except for cows that do not eat their share of the minerals. Bulls often have trouble when medicated mineral is fed because they do not eat enough of the product on a body weight basis. For animals that do not eat enough minerals, or if feeding medicated mineral is impractical, there is a vaccine that is produced in Louisiana that can be used by permission of the Oklahoma State Veterinarian. For more information on this limited use vaccine, visit with your local veterinarian.

Put the preventative program of your choice in place now and check your cows regularly looking for atypical behavior and animals that are pale or yellow around the eyes. Don't let anaplasmosis rob you of your summer profits.

## **This Year Test the Forage Before You Cut!**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Summer has definitely arrived in Oklahoma! Hot dry summer weather brings about heat and drought stress on summer annuals. Stressed plants such as the forage sorghums can occasionally accumulate dangerous concentrations of nitrates. These high nitrate plants, either standing in the field, or fed as hay, can cause abortion in pregnant cattle, or death if consumed in great enough quantities. Nitrates do not dissipate from sun-dried hay (in contrast to prussic acid), therefore once the hay is cut the nitrate levels remain constant. Therefore, producers should test hay fields before they cut them for hay. Stop by any [OSU County Extension office](#) for testing details. Testing the forage before cutting gives the producer an additional option of waiting and allowing for the nitrate to lower in concentration before harvesting the hay. The major sources of nitrate toxicity in Oklahoma will be summer annual sorghum type plants, including sudan hybrids, sorgo-sudans, sorghum-sudans, millets, and Johnsongrass.

Drought-stressed corn plants were tested last summer in North Central Oklahoma and were reported to test well above the 10000 ppm nitrate concentration that is considered potentially lethal to cattle. Other plants also may accumulate nitrates. See [OSU Fact Sheet PSS-2903](#).

Some of the management techniques to reduce the risk of nitrate toxicity (Note: the risk of this poisoning cannot be totally eliminated), include:

- 1) Test the crop before you harvest it. IF it has an elevated concentration of nitrates, you still have the option of waiting for normal plant metabolism to bring the concentration back to a safe level. And experience tells us that we cannot estimate nitrate content just by looking at the field.
- 2) Raise the cutter bar when harvesting the hay. Nitrates are in greatest concentration in the lower stem. Raising the cutter bar may reduce the tonnage, but cutting more tons of a toxic material has no particular value.

- 3) Know the extent of nitrate accumulation in the hay and the levels that are dangerous to different classes of cattle; ie, pregnant cows, open cows, or stocker steers. If you still have doubt about the quality of the hay, send a forage sample to a reputable laboratory for analysis, to get an estimate of the nitrate concentration. This will give some guidelines as to the extent of dilution that may be necessary to more safely feed the hay.
  
- 4) Allow cattle to become adapted to nitrate in the hay. By feeding small amounts of the forage sorghum along with other feeds such as grass hay or grains, cattle begin to adapt to the nitrates in the feed and develop a capability to "digest" the nitrate with less danger. Producers should avoid the temptation of feeding the high nitrate forage for the first time after a snow or ice storm. Cattle will be stressed, hungry, and unadapted to the nitrates. They will consume unusually large amounts of the forage and be in high risk for nitrate toxicity.
  
- 5) Be sure to read [OSU Fact Sheet PSS-2903](#) closely before cutting and feeding any summer annual hay.

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