

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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In this Issue:

Oklahoma Cattle Producers Face Additional Decisions

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

Keeping Good Records Can Ease the Pain of a Disaster

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Don't Let Your Guard Down on Nitrates

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Oklahoma pasture and range conditions are deteriorating rapidly and some producers are facing decisions that are a bitter flashback to last year. However, conditions so far are nowhere near as severe as last year with the possible exception of the western tier and Panhandle counties where conditions never recovered much from last year. This is borne out in the most recent range and pasture conditions where 24 percent of the state is rated very poor compared to 57 percent at this time last year. Last year 86 percent of the state was rated poor or very poor at the end of July compared to 64 percent this year. However, just four weeks ago only 22 percent of Oklahoma range and pasture was rated poor to very poor, so the jump to 64 percent shows just how fast conditions are deteriorating.

Similarly, the production and marketing decisions for cattle producers have so far not been as challenging as last year. I have recently received several anecdotal reports of producers selling or moving cattle due to lack of forage but nothing compared to a year ago. In the last four weeks since July 4, total receipts of feeder cattle at the seven federally reported Oklahoma cattle auctions are down 40 percent from the same period one year ago. This amounts to some 64,000 head fewer feeder cattle marketed in the last month compared to one year ago. The decrease in cow sales is even more dramatic. Auction receipts of cows in the last four weeks is down 77 percent from last year. The fact that total Oklahoma cow numbers are down would explain some decrease in cow sales but the decrease this year clearly indicates that if herd liquidation in Oklahoma is occurring this year, it is at a significantly smaller rate than last year.

However, continued deterioration of conditions in Oklahoma will precipitate more cattle production and marketing decisions. At this point the prospects for significant additional hay production is minimal so winter feed supplies can be evaluated. If fall rains materialize, cool

season pasture and wheat pasture may produce much needed fall and winter forage. In the absence of new forage production, producers should evaluate alternatives now and make plans for stretching current forage supplies through the winter. Limited forage supplies may mean that early calf weaning and early cow culling should be evaluated soon.

The fact that market impacts have been more severe this year complicates drought related marketing decision. Feeder calf prices have dropped significantly this summer as widespread drought conditions have developed across the country. There are indications that feeder as well as fed cattle prices have bottomed but uncertainty about forage as well as grain market conditions will persist into the fall. Continued tightening of feeder supplies for the remainder of the year will support feeder price recovery but it will depend critically on forage conditions this fall.

Keeping Good Records Can Ease the Pain of a Disaster

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The devastating wild fires that have charred nearly 80,000 acres in Oklahoma in the last week have given cattle producers extra worries. Cleaning up after a wildfire is difficult enough. Losing valuable cattle and hay brings additional financial hardship to the situation.

Cattle loss can occur in several scenarios. Livestock may be killed, lost, or stolen during a stormy situation. An accurate accounting of livestock and property is essential to a cattle operation's disaster preparedness. Keep a CURRENT inventory of all animals and the pastures where they are located. Individual animal ID tags on all animals have several other purposes, but can become extremely valuable if cattle become scattered or even stolen. During the upcoming fall calving season, update these records frequently to reflect the newborn calves that are arriving.

If these records are computer based, consider having a "back-up" copy stored at a neighbor's or a relative's house. Hand written records can be photocopied and placed in two different locations. We do not like to think about the "unthinkable" situation of a direct hit on our home or livestock buildings, but tornados and wildfires occasionally do destroy these dwellings. After the disaster is over, that second set of records could prove to be very inexpensive and very helpful.

Don't Let Your Guard Down on Nitrates

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

A few spotty rain showers may fall even in the midst of heat and drought. They are not the kind to end a drought, but they momentarily cool the air, make the pastures and hay fields look a little greener, and improve farmer and rancher attitudes. In the case of drought-stressed summer annuals such as forage sorghums, millets, and sudangrass hybrids, the rain-shower may be a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Avoid cutting the summer annual hay immediately after a drought-easing rain. Often the highest concentrations of nitrate will be in the first 48 hours after the first rain after an extended heat and drought stress period. Usually it takes the plants at least about a week to return to normal nitrate concentrations if the weather and moisture conditions remain favorable. The drought-stressed plant may again be taking up nitrates from the soil, but not have the enzymes present in great enough quantity to reduce the nitrate on to form amino acids. Amino acids are the building blocks of plant proteins. With time and good moisture conditions the plant may return to normal metabolism and growth, which in turn will cause reduced nitrate concentrations.

However, in the meantime, producers should continue to check the forage with samples sent to a laboratory for quantitative evaluation or conduct the field test with diphenylamine nitrate kits available at most Oklahoma State University County Extension offices.

(<http://countyext2.okstate.edu>) Once the forage is cut, the nitrate concentration will stay approximately the same until fed next winter. Therefore it is imperative to know the nitrate level before the crop is harvested. Learn more about nitrate toxicity in cattle by downloading the OSU Fact Sheet PSS-2903 Nitrate Toxicity in Livestock. (<http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-1996/PSS-2903web.pdf>).

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