

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

The Newsletter

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## **Drought Impacts on the Beef Cow Herd Could Accelerate This Fall**

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

It is difficult to estimate just how much impact the drought this year has had on the cow herd. Beef cow slaughter for the year to date is down nearly 11 percent from last year, a smaller decline than previously expected. While this indicates some additional herd liquidation, just how much more beef cow slaughter would have declined without a drought is uncertain. Perhaps even more uncertain is what is happening with replacement heifers. The inventory of beef replacement heifers was up slightly at the beginning of the year but the drought could be forcing producers to divert more heifers into feeder cattle markets rather than entering the herd as breeding animals. The number of heifers on feed on July 1 was up slightly from last year. The combination of cow slaughter and heifer placement into the herd will determine the year over year changes in the beef cow herd inventory.

Whatever level of liquidation has already occurred leaves the important question of whether producers have made enough adjustments relative to forage conditions and winter hay supplies. There are some anecdotal indications that minimal adjustments in cattle numbers have been made in some areas leaving those operations especially vulnerable to winter weather conditions. Pasture and range conditions remain very bad in many regions, though most areas have shown slight improvement recently. Percent of pastures and ranges rated as poor to very poor are 59 percent for the entire country with higher percentages for the Great Plains (77 percent); Corn Belt (69 percent); and Southern Plains (66 percent) along with the Western region at 54 percent. These are slightly offset by significant improvement in pasture conditions in the Southeast and Northeast.

Poor summer grazing conditions this year are accompanied by severely reduced hay production. The August USDA Crop Production report included estimates of 2012 alfalfa and other hay production for the U.S. and for most states. Alfalfa hay production is estimated to decrease by 21.5 percent and other hay production is projected to decrease by 13.3 percent compared to the 2006-2010 average. These combine for an estimated 2012 all hay production for the U.S. that is 17.3 percent smaller than the 2006-2010 average and would be the smallest total U.S. hay production since 1976. This estimate includes 21 states with all hay production down by more than 10 percent and includes 13 states with reductions in excess of 20 percent. Current year hay production plus May 1 hay stocks represent the total supply of hay available going into the winter. Total U.S. May 1 hay stocks were 5.9 percent above the 2006-2010 average but this masks the fact that hay stocks were down more than 10 percent in 14 states, including several states impacted by drought in 2011 or 2012 or both years.

The estimated all hay supply for 2012 (May 1 stocks plus 2012 production) is down by 14.4 percent for the U.S. compared to the 2006-2010 average including 18 states down more than 10 percent, of which 12 states are down more than 20 percent. Arkansas is the lowest with an estimated 2012 total hay supply down 49 percent from average, followed by Iowa, Oklahoma and Kansas, all down 33 percent or more. An additional five states (Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin) have 2012 hay supplies down more than 25 percent from average. Other states with estimated 2012 hay supplies down 15 percent or more include Colorado, Kentucky, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming. Limited hay supplies will be accompanied by record hay price. Current Livestock Marketing Information Center (LMIC) projections put the 2012/2013 season average hay price at a record \$195/ton, exceeding the 2011 record of \$173/ton and up 60 percent from the 2006-2010 average of \$122/ton

Cow culling normally peaks seasonally in the fourth quarter and we may be vulnerable to stronger than normal culling this year. The reality of limited forage and hay supplies combined with high hay and supplement feed cost could prompt additional sales of cows and other cattle this fall. The current pace of beef cow slaughter implies a herd culling rate of 11.4 percent, which is above the long term average of 9.6 percent, but well below the 2011 rate of 12.3 percent. Additional cow culling may be needed this fall. For example, a modest increase in the beef cow herd culling rate to 11.6 percent, would mean that beef cow slaughter for the remainder of the year would be down only 5.25 percent compared to last year and would result in a year over year decrease in beef cow slaughter of 8.5 percent. It all depends on how much adjustment to limited forage supplies has already been done and how much more might be needed in the next couple of months.

## **No Margin for Error**

Dave Sparks, DVM, Oklahoma State University Area Extension Veterinarian and J.J. Jones,  
Oklahoma State University Area Extension Agriculture Economist

Beef producers today are again looking at the old good news/bad news situation. The good news is, calf prices are higher than most of us ever thought we would live to see. Unfortunately

this is offset by record high grain and feed prices, expensive fuel and fertilizer, increasing rental rates of pasture lands, and labor that is not only expensive but hard to find. To top off high input prices, add in the effects of extremely limited forage and hay due to the ongoing drought. The bottom line is that profits are within reach, but only for those that take control of their herd management.

Perhaps the biggest waste of expensive inputs is the open, or non-pregnant, cow. Although costs vary widely between producers the average cost of maintaining a cow in Oklahoma is in excess of \$450.00/yr. This is for all costs including feed, supplies, equipment depreciation, grazing forage, interest, and opportunity costs. Approximately 80% of this cost is incurred in the months between October and April. You can do the math for your herd but it is easy to see that each open cow is robbing the profits earned by several cows that wean calves. Cull cow prices are high and many of these cows are in better condition now than they will be in the late winter or spring. By pregnancy checking your cows in the fall you can eliminate these wasted inputs and use the current high salvage value to replace open cows with bred cows or heifers.

There are a couple of options for pregnancy testing, both with pros and cons. The old standby is rectal palpation by an experienced veterinarian. The cost will vary by area, your facilities and help provided, and the number you need done, but for most practitioners it will run about \$5.00 per head. The advantage for this method is that you know which cows are pregnant or open immediately, before you turn them back out. In the hands of a competent veterinarian this method is very accurate from about 30 days until full term. On occasion the veterinarian will also pick up other problems that need to be addressed, such as lymphoma in cows or narrow pelvises in heifers.

Another option for pregnancy testing is a blood test available through BioPryn. This test attempts to detect traces of a specific protein in the blood that is only produced by the placenta. Producers can draw blood samples and submit them to a laboratory for the testing. The cost of the test is about \$2.50 per test, plus the cost of the blood collection supplies, blood tubes, and postage. This test is accurate after about 28 days in heifers and dry cows and after about 73 days in nursing cows. One drawback is that the test requires 3 to 5 days to know who is pregnant or open, so the cows may need to be gathered a second time to sort off the open cows. More information, including instructions for taking samples and a catalog of collecting supplies, can be found at [www.biotracking.com](http://www.biotracking.com).

No matter which method you choose to determine pregnancy, don't forget that while they are in the chute is a great time to examine mouths to determine age and evaluate udder condition and temperament. Old cows, cows with bad udders, and cows with attitude problems should also be culled along with the open cows. Even if these problem cows are pregnant in the fall, their chances of actually weaning a calf are greatly reduced. With today's costs, every cow has to bring you a paycheck every year. If she can't do it with a calf, she will have to do it with herself.

## **Prepare Before You Pull (that difficult birth)**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The fall-calving season is underway. Before applying the obstetrical chains to "pull" a calf during a difficult birth, a proper analysis of the situation must be made. Wash the vulva, anus and the area in between using soap and warm water. Pulling on a calf should only be done when the presentation and posture of the calf are normal. Normal is defined as the "anterior presentation" with front feet first, head resting on the limbs, and the eyes level with the knees. A backwards calf can be delivered only when both back limbs are presented. Before chains are applied, be certain that the cervix is completely dilated. Know your limitations. If you examine the cow or heifer and find it is going to be a more difficult task than you can handle within a short time, call your local large animal veterinarian as soon as possible.

To properly use obstetrical chains when assisting with a difficult birth, follow this procedure. To attach the chain, loop it around the thin part of the leg above the fetlock. Then, make a half hitch and tighten it below the joint and above the foot. Make certain that the chain is positioned in such a manner that it goes over the top of the toes. In this way the pressure is applied so as to pull the sharp points of the calves' hooves away from the soft tissue of the vaginal wall.

Obtain a copy of "Calving Time Management of Beef Cows and Heifers" E-1006, an OSU Extension Circular that thoroughly discusses working with cows and heifers before and during calving season. It can be downloaded from: <http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-5171/E-1006web.pdf>

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