

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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In this Issue:

Wheat Pasture Prospects Fading Fast

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

Observe Bulls Closely as the Breeding Season Begins

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Wheat Pasture Prospects Fading Fast

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No significant rain has fallen in Oklahoma in over two weeks. Last week's Crop Progress showed that 25 percent of Oklahoma wheat was in good condition and 61 percent was fair with only 12 percent poor or very poor. Though the wheat crop in 2011 was planted later, the crop condition at the end of October was substantially better than this year. Moreover, wheat conditions will likely show significant deterioration very soon without rain. Since the majority of wheat has emerged and soil moisture is depleted in many areas, additional moisture is critical and must arrive very soon. In the driest areas of the north central and northwest parts of the state, wheat has either not emerged or has not been planted at this time. The short term weather forecast indicates little precipitation probability for the next 8-14 days. The El Niño that has

been anticipated much of the summer and fall appears to have faded into weak or neutral conditions, providing fewer chances for winter moisture in the Southern Plains.

Stocker demand has faltered as the potential wheat pasture is far from a reality at this time. Stocker producers are in a wait-and-see mode before committing to stocker purchases. There appears to be considerable interest in wheat pasture leasing by producers as well as feedlots hoping to secure some spring feeder cattle supplies and use wheat pasture to put on cheaper weight gain before feedlot placement. However, the clock is ticking on wheat pasture prospects in Oklahoma.

Many cow-calf producers were likewise hoping that wheat pasture would supplement hay supplies that are, in many cases, barely sufficient for winter feeding. The recent lack of rain is beginning to re-advance drought conditions that had improved somewhat in the past few weeks. The final set of pasture and range conditions in October showed 69 percent of the state in poor to very poor condition compared to 86 percent poor to very poor at the end of October, 2011. Lack of water is increasingly the principal challenge of many producers. Many ponds are critically low and only in a very few isolated areas did the earlier rains produce any runoff to replenish water supplies. If freezing weather should occur, many ponds will freeze solid even if they are not completely dry; a threat that will grow as winter approaches.

Oklahoma has not experienced nearly the level of cattle liquidation or early marketings in 2012, compared to the massive liquidation in 2011. Better forage and hay production in the first half of 2012, combined with already destocked herds, made it possible for most producers to get to this point in 2012 with little additional liquidation. However, current water and hay conditions mean that many producers may not be able to make it through the winter or will arrive at spring with water and forage resources completely depleted. Continued dry conditions that eliminate wheat pasture and fails to replenish water supplies sets up the next round of cattle liquidation in Oklahoma. A normal winter will be tough and anything more severe than normal will accelerate additional liquidation.

Observe Bulls Closely as the Breeding Season Begins

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The 2012 fall breeding season is nearly here. With the high input costs of keeping each cow, it is vital that a high pregnancy rate occurs during the upcoming breeding season. Obviously, bulls represent one-half of the factory that will produce a calf crop to sell next year.

A good manager keeps an eye on his bulls during the breeding season to make sure that they are getting the cows bred. Occasionally a bull that has passed a breeding soundness exam may have difficulty serving cows in heat, especially after heavy service. Inability to complete normal service and low fertility are more prevalent and therefore more detrimental, than is low libido (failure to seek out and detect cows in heat) to calf crop percent. Such problems can best be detected by observing bulls while they work. **Therefore producers should (if at all possible) watch bulls breed cows during the first part of each breeding season.** Take a thermos of hot coffee at dusk or dawn's early light and watch from the cab of the pickup to see if the bull(s) are doing the job for which they were purchased. If problems are apparent, the bull can be replaced while salvaging the remainder of the breeding season and next year's calf crop. Likewise a small proportion of bulls can wear out from heavy service and lose interest. These, too, will need to be replaced. The greater the number of cows allotted to each bull in the breeding pasture the more critical it is that every bull be ready to work every day of the breeding season.

Injuries to bulls during the breeding season are relatively common. When a bull becomes lame or incapable of breeding, because of an injury to his reproductive tract, he needs to be removed from the breeding pasture and replaced with another bull.

Proper cow to bull ratios are difficult to define. There is tremendous variation among bulls as to their capability to breed large numbers of females. Recommendations for smaller herds that will utilize only one bull per pasture may need to be conservative. **A time honored rule-of-thumb is to place about the same number of cows or heifers with a young bull as his age is in months.** For instance a bull that is 14 months old going into his first breeding season should be expected to breed 14 or 15 cows; whereas as a two-year old bull may be placed with 20 - 25 cows. Mature bulls that have been examined by a veterinarian and have passed a breeding soundness exam can be placed with 25 - 35 cows and normally give good results.