COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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Beef Cow Slaughter Continues at Liquidation Pace

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With only a few weeks of data to finish the year, beef cow slaughter, though significantly smaller than last year, is on pace to ensure additional herd liquidation for the 2012 year. For the year to date, beef cow slaughter is down 12.6 percent from last year. Smaller year over year reductions in recent weeks have reduced the magnitude of the decrease from last year. In fact, one interpretation of smaller year over year decreases the last few weeks could be seen as an indication that liquidation is increasing with growing slaughter rates relative to a year ago. However, by this time last year most of the drought forced liquidation was past and beef cow slaughter had dropped back to more seasonally typical levels. In other words, weekly beef cow slaughter has dropped back to single digit decreases from last year after spending much of the year with double digit decreases but it really says more about what was happening last year than this year.

However, at the current pace, 2012 beef cow slaughter will be over 11 percent of the January 1 cow herd inventory. This will make the fifth consecutive year of double digit beef culling rates. The average annual beef cow culling rate is 9.6 percent. In previous liquidation phases, beef cow culling has increased over 10 percent per year for only one or two years. Five years in a row of double digit beef culling has never happened since beef cow slaughter data became available in 1986. The liquidation in 2012 is less than 2011 and the beef herd is expected to be down roughly 1.6 percent on January 1, 2013. In order to halt the persistent beef cow liquidation, beef cow slaughter will need to drop by 13 percent or more, year over year, for each of the next two years. Beef cow culling rates usually drop to under 9 percent for two to four years during herd expansions. The drought will determine whether that process can begin in 2013.

Persistent extreme drought conditions are setting up another round of significant herd liquidation if conditions do not improve. In Oklahoma and similar regions that rely on stock ponds for livestock water, the lack of water is the most critical factor in the next 2-3 months. We have already seen many calves marketed this fall with dried mud to the knees on the front legs, indicating that they have been utilizing the last available water and before being forced to market. Some cows will be liquidated through the winter for lack of water and many more will move promptly next spring if the current dry conditions persist. In the Southern Plains, if the current dry winter is followed by a dry spring, 2013 will be a repeat of the massive liquidations of 2011 except that it will happen earlier with more sales before July 4 compared to after, like 2011.

Combining Limited Access of Hay with Nighttime Feeding

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Cow-calf producers have always wished for the calves to be born in daylight. If cows go into labor in daylight, it is easier to see the cows and it is easier to get help if extra assistance is required to help with the delivery.

The easiest and most practical method of inhibiting nighttime calving at present is by feeding cows at night; the physiological mechanism is unknown, but some hormonal effect may be involved. Although some cows will still give birth in the middle of the night, the percentage of cows calving in the daylight will increase if the feeding activity is done late in the day. Research

has shown that cows fed at, or after dusk will have a 2 or 3 to 1 ratio of calves born in daylight versus those born at night.

This year will provide an extra challenge for some producers. Those that need to stretch the hay supplies as much as possible may choose to limit access to the hay. Limiting the time to 4 to 6 hours per day that cows have access to the big round bales (in bale feeders) has been shown to improve hay feeding efficiency. However, limited access to the hay may be difficult to accomplish with "nighttime feeding". If the cows are turned in with the hay at dusk, they must be removed from the hay at 10:00 pm to midnight—in the dark. This is neither easy, or convenient to accomplish.

Perhaps a better solution would be turn the cows into the area with the hay bale just before noon and use the protein supplement such as range cubes to coax them into the adjoining pasture at dusk. This would allow the cows access to the big round bales for about 5 hours, then they will eat the supplement over the next hour. The shift to daylight calving may not be as dramatic as would be accomplished with total night time feeding, however some compromise is necessary in times of limited forage. There will still be a need for those 2:00 am heifer checks! Be sure to have enough feeder space for all of the cows to have access to the hay bales at once.