COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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Cattle and Beef Markets Find Some Footing

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Cattle and beef markets weakened throughout January and February as a combination of weak demand and looming drought weighed heavily on feeder, fed and boxed beef markets. Beef demand has no doubt been negatively impacted by a series of storms, dating back to Hurricane Sandy, which impacted population centers in the northeast. Choice boxed beef dropped from roughly $194/cwt. in early January to a late February low of $182/cwt. Fed cattle likewise dropped from $128/cwt. at the beginning of the year to a recent low under $122/cwt. Oklahoma prices for both stocker calves and heavy feeder cattle dropped through February as well.

However, market conditions appear to be improving in several different areas. Low boxed beef prices finally spurred sales and combined with recent slaughter reductions and decreasing carcass weights to push Choice boxed beef prices up to $188 by Friday, up over $5/cwt. from the previous Friday. Fed cattle prices also jumped last week buoyed by stronger boxed beef prices and winter storms that disrupted cattle shipments and caused production losses and increased death loss in central and southern plains feedlots. The winter weather impacts will likely continue for several weeks. During the same time feedlot supplies should be tightening as a reflection of the limited placements in the second half of 2012. Fed cattle prices should be strongly supported well into the second quarter of 2013, with the key being boxed beef prices depending on stronger consumer demand.

Feeder cattle markets, also disrupted by winter weather, remained weak last week but are expected to bounce back soon. Recent moisture in Oklahoma significantly improved the immediate drought situation and will likely stabilize feeder markets. Though much more moisture is needed to eliminate the drought, the assurance of initial moisture to begin forage growth is a great help to cattle producers. Cool season grasses and winter wheat are already responding to improved moisture with new growth. Water concerns remain high as little pond recharge has occurred thus far. The recent moisture is only a small deposit on what is needed to fix the drought but it is a start and that is encouraging for producers.

Don’t Let Those Heifers Slip Now!

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

As we get closer to April and the breeding season for replacement heifers that are destined for a spring calving herd, proper nutritional management is more important than ever. In a “normal” year, (with fall rains and winter snows) cattle have been removed from wheat pasture at this time to maintain optimum grain yield. In most cases this winter the heifers have been fed supplement and hay. They will be turned in with the bulls or put on a synchronization program to be bred in April. In some cases this means that the heifers must be moved from one location to another that is closer to working facilities. The trick, of course, is to not let those heifers go on a steep downslide in body condition as we approach the breeding season. Research has shown that if heifers (near the time of reaching puberty) undergo a severe reduction in dietary intake of protein and especially energy, breeding success may be disappointing.

Oklahoma State University researchers have studied the impact of short term energy restriction on ovulation rates of cycling replacement heifers. This trial is reported in the 2001 OSU Animal Science Research Report. The effects of acutely restricting nutrition on ovulation and metabolic hormones were evaluated in Angus x Hereford heifers. All of the heifers were housed in individual pens in a barn and fed a diet supplying 120% of their maintenance requirements for protein and energy (1.2 M) for 10 days to allow time to adjust to the environment and diet. All of the heifers were determined to be cycling at the conclusion of this adjustment period. Then the heifers were split into two groups. Half of the heifers were then fed a diet supplying either 40% of their maintenance requirements (.4 M). The other half of the heifers were continued on the original diet that supplied 120% (1.2 M) of the maintenance requirements. All heifers were injected with prostaglandin so they should ovulate on about day 14 of the trial. Seventy percent (7 of 10) of .4 M heifers did not ovulate as a response to the injection, whereas all of the 1.2 M heifers had normal ovulation.

In this study, restricting nutrient intake for 14 days prevented ovulation in a large percentage of beef heifers without altering visible body condition. Heifers should be managed to avoid short-term nutrient restriction to maintain normal estrous cycles.