

# COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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

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## **Oklahoma Drought: Good News and Bad News**

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

Weekend rains brought one to two inches of moisture to the critically dry northwest part of Oklahoma and added another 1.5 – 2.5 inches to the east central and southeastern parts of the state. The middle of the state from southwest to northeast received up to one half inch of rain. These rain totals will further improve the drought situation in the state. The latest drought monitor, which does not include this rain, showed that less than 10 percent of the state is in the D4 Exceptional (worst) drought category with another 52 percent of the state in the D3 Extreme drought category. That's down from three months ago when more than one third of the state was in the D4 category and more than 90 percent of the state was D3 or worse. Clearly there is short term moisture for cool season forage growth and there will some soil moisture for warm season forage growth to begin in the next month. All of that is the good news.

The bad news is that 100 percent of Oklahoma is still in D2-D4 drought. It will take several more inches of rain above normal to continue soil moisture replenishment. With warm and

windy spring weather beginning, the current moisture will disappear quickly without regular additional rain. The latest Climate Prediction Center drought forecast through the end of May calls for persistent drought conditions based on precipitation probabilities of normal at best and below normal for the western half of the state. For cattle producers, an additional challenge remains. The drought moderation in the past month has provided little in the way of surface water recharge. The ability of many producers to utilize early forage growth will continue to be hampered by lack of pond water.

Stocker cattle prices were stronger last week with heavy feeders mostly steady. Some grass demand is building and stocker prices will continue to improve if grazing prospects also continue to improve. Sharply higher boxed beef and fed cattle prices have provided some relief to cattle feeders enduring extremely poor feedlot margins but have not yet translated into stronger demand for feedlot replacements. Many feedlots continue to struggle with wet and muddy conditions and the delays in cattle marketings resulting from recent snowstorms. Heavy feeder demand should build some over the next month as feedlots attempt to reload inventories. Feeder cattle demand will depend critically on the ability of boxed beef and fed cattle prices to hold onto recent gains and push even higher. Feeder supplies will remain very tight with poor winter grazing producing smaller feeder cattle marketings this spring combined with fewer feeder cattle imports and the likelihood of limited heifer retention beginning this spring. Also within the next month, the corn market will be actively anticipating new crop corn conditions and prices and the feeder market will begin to reflect those expectations for feed prices later in the year.

Cull cow prices have increased seasonally the past month though less this year compared to a year ago. Cull cow prices are likely to continue to increase seasonally into May unless drought forces more cow liquidation in the next month or two. Breeding cow values have not changed much the past month in Oklahoma but some demand strengthening is likely in the next month with better forage prospects.

## **Schedule the Breeding Soundness Exams Soon**

by Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Although the spring calving season may still be ongoing, the next breeding season is only a few weeks away. Now is the time to schedule the old and new bulls for their pre-breeding soundness examination.

For the breeding soundness evaluation to be successful, bulls should be evaluated 30 to 60 days before the start of breeding. It is important to allow sufficient time to replace questionable bulls. Bulls could also be evaluated at the end of breeding to determine if their fertility

decreased. A breeding soundness exam is administered by a veterinarian and includes a physical examination (feet, legs, eyes, teeth, flesh cover, scrotal size and shape), an internal and external examination of the reproductive tract, and semen evaluation for sperm cell motility and normality.

The physical examination studies overall appearance. Flesh cover is one factor to evaluate. Body condition can be affected by length of the breeding season, grazing and supplemental feeding conditions, number of cows the bull is expected to service and distance required to travel during breeding. Ideally, bulls should have enough fat cover at the start of breeding so their ribs appear smooth across their sides. A body condition score 6 (where 1 = emaciated and 9 = very obese) is the target body condition prior to the breeding season.

Sound feet and legs are very important because if they are unsound, this can result in the inability to travel and mount for mating. The general health of the bull is critical since sick, aged and injured bulls are less likely to mate and usually have lower semen quality. The external examination of the reproductive tract includes evaluation of the testes, spermatic cords and epididymis. Scrotal circumference is an important measure since it is directly related to the total mass of sperm producing tissue, sperm cell normality and the onset of puberty in the bull and his female offspring. Bulls with large circumference will produce more sperm with higher normality and also reach sexual maturity sooner.

Examination of the external underline before and during semen collection will detect any inflammation, foreskin adhesions, warts, abscesses and penile deviations. The internal examination is conducted to detect any abnormalities in the internal reproductive organs. Also, be certain to ask your veterinarian about the need to test the bulls for the reproductive disease, trichomoniasis.

The semen evaluation is done by examining a sample of the semen under a microscope. The veterinarian will estimate the percentage of sperm cells that are moving in a forward direction. This estimate is called "motility". In addition, the sperm cells will be individually examined for proper shape or "morphology". Less than 30 percent of the cells should be found to have an abnormal shape.

Any bull meeting all minimum standards for the physical exam, scrotal size and semen quality will be classed as a "satisfactory" potential breeder. Many bulls that fail any minimum standard will be given a rating of "classification deferred."

This rating indicates that the bull will need another test to confirm status. Mature bulls (that were listed as classification deferred) should be retested after four to six weeks. Mature bulls will be classified as unsatisfactory potential breeders if they fail subsequent tests. Young bulls that are just reaching puberty may be rated as "classification deferred", and then later meet all of the minimum standards. Therefore caution should be exercised when making culling decisions based on just one breeding soundness exam.

Many producers work hard to manage their cows for high fertility. They may assume that the bulls will do their expected duties. However, it's important to pay close attention to bulls to establish successful breeding.

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