

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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

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Deteriorating Drought Conditions Threaten as Critical Forage Period Approaches

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Drought conditions across Oklahoma are significantly improved compared to three months ago. At the end of 2012, all of Oklahoma was in D2-D4 drought with 37 percent of the state in the D4 (Exceptional) drought category and 95 percent of the state in the D3 and D4 categories. The most recent Drought Monitor shows that all of Oklahoma is still in D1-D4

drought but less than 10 percent of the state is in D4 and 53 percent in the D3 and D4 categories. However, the improvement may be temporary.

Cool weather has slowed forage development this year compared to last year but things are greening up nevertheless. Most of Oklahoma has received moisture in the last few weeks that ensures that some green up will happen. However, most of the moisture came more than a month ago and moisture totals across much of Oklahoma have been well below normal for the last 30 days. Some areas of the eastern part of the state continue to receive moisture and drought conditions continue to moderate. There has been some recharge of stock ponds in parts of the southeastern region of the state. However, the driest regions across the north and western parts of the state have received little moisture in the last two weeks. Drought conditions will worsen again very soon without additional rain.

April, May and June are critical periods for pasture and hay production. Loss of forage production during this period will jeopardize cattle prospects for the remainder of the year. Many producers have squeaked through the winter with minimal hay supplies and have no forage reserves at this time. However, the minimal moisture available at this time is almost worse than nothing. Producers who graze early pasture growth run the risk of further damaging already stressed pastures. Pastures must have some time to grow and recuperate before more grazing pressure is applied. Producers need to think beyond the next 30 days and develop a plan for the rest of the year. Additional herd culling is a painful prospect to contemplate but it is important to realistically assess the situation and make needed decisions early rather than drag on and risk more long term damage to the forage resources. Early weaning calves is a viable strategy for many producers that can reduce the pressure on feed needs by selling additional cows soon and developing a grazing or drylot program to hold calves for additional weight gain.

Alternative Weaning Dates for Fall-Calving Cows

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Oklahoma State University animal scientists evaluated weaning dates of 158 Angus fall-calving cows over a 4 year period. Cows were allowed to nurse their calves for about 210 days (April Weaning) or 300 days (July-Wean). All cows calved in September or October and were weaned in mid-April (April-Wean) or mid-July (July-Wean). April-weaned young cows had greater re-breeding percentages (98.4% versus 89.3%) than July-weaned young cows. *Young* cows were defined as the two and three year old cows.

However, there was no advantage in the re-breeding performance of April-weaned *mature* cows compared to July-weaned *mature* cows (90.2% versus 96.7%). *Mature* cows were defined as cows that were 4 years of age and older. April-weaned cows were heavier and fleshier at calving than July-weaned cows.

Calves weaned in July were 90 days older and 204 pounds heavier (642 lb versus 438 lb) when weaned than were the April-weaned calves. The April-weaned calves were allowed to graze native pasture after weaning and weighed 607 pounds in mid July. [Source: Hudson and co-workers. Journal of Anim. Sci. 2010 vol. 88:1577.](#)

With the lack of forage, high priced supplements, and concern about summer pasture prospects, April weaning of fall-calving cows may be worth a close look in 2013. Young and/or thin cows should benefit most from the early-weaning date. A couple of extra months without a nursing calf should give thin cows a better chance to “bounce back” in body condition before calving next fall. Selling calves at a younger age and lighter weight should be offset by a higher rebreeding performance in the cow herd during next winter’s breeding season.

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