COW/CALF CORNER

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Poor Forage Conditions a Big Challenge

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

Early May provides the first look at the forage conditions facing the beef cattle industry in 2013. Moisture conditions have improved marginally with the most recent Drought Monitor indicating that 33 percent of the U.S. is in D2-D4 drought conditions, down from 40 percent three months ago but worse than last year, when 20 percent of the country was in D2 or worse drought at this time. The drought is now confined mostly to the western half of the country, across much of Great Plains and Intermountain regions, and covering an area that contains a large percentage of beef cows. The long, cold winter has extended the carryover drought impacts with additional demands for hay and more pressure on stressed pastures and ranges.

The May Crop Progress report contains the estimated hay stocks on farms as of May 1. The inventory of 14.2 million tons is the smallest since 2007 and smaller than any May 1 total in data back to 1973. Total hay stocks on May 1, 2013 for the U.S. are down 36 percent from the previous ten year average. Reduced hay production due to drought the past two years and the extended winter demands this spring have pulled hay stocks to extremely low levels. Given current drought conditions and cold weather delays this spring, hay production is likely to be below normal again in 2013, thereby limiting the recovery of hay stocks this year. The region from Ohio to South Dakota and south to Kansas and Missouri has the lowest May 1 hay stocks compared to the ten year average from 2003-2012. Hay stocks for May 1, 2013 were down sharply from average in these states including: Illinois (down 52 percent); Indiana (down 44 percent); Iowa (down 62 percent); Kansas (down 58 percent); Missouri (down 53 percent); Nebraska (down 45 percent); and South Dakota (down 54 percent).

Last week's Crop Progress report also contained the first spring estimates of range and pasture conditions. The report confirms that many areas are beginning the growing season with significantly worse pasture and range conditions than last year. For the entire country, 36 percent of all pasture and ranges are in poor to very poor condition, double the 17 percent value at the same time last year. Regionally, the Great Plains has the worst conditions, with 57 percent in poor to very poor condition; followed by the Southern Plains at 47 percent and the Western region at 37 percent. Pasture and range condition in several individual states are worse than suggested by these regional averages. In New Mexico, 91 percent of the ranges are in poor to very poor condition; followed by Colorado (76 percent); Nebraska (70 percent); Kansas (67 percent); South Dakota (58 percent); Wyoming (55 percent); Montana (54 percent); and Texas (53 percent).

Pasture and hay growth is late this spring due to lingering cold weather and snow cover in many areas. Too much winter was just too much for some producers given the forage limitations and has contributed to unexpected beef cow liquidation this spring and larger than expected marketings of feeder cattle in some regions. In the short run, this is likely augmenting feedlot placements now at the expense of feeder supplies later in the year. The long run impacts may be greater. Some heifers designated as potential replacements on January 1 have likely already been diverted into feeder markets. Beef cow slaughter has been well above year ago levels the past seven weeks and year to date beef cow slaughter is barely down at all year over year. Another year of beef cow herd liquidation may already be inevitable. The next few weeks will determine any chance to stabilize the beef cow herd in 2013 if forage conditions improve and beef cow slaughter declines.

Adding Value to Cull Cows

Gant Mourer, Oklahoma State University Beef Value Enhancement Specialist

Often times, marketing and increasing value of cull cows are overlooked by producers. Mainly due to the fact that the cow is open or aborted and that feed is limiting and it is not cost effective to keep a non-efficient part of the ranch around with increasing feed prices and decreasing forage availability. However, cull cows can represent up to 10-20% of the total revenue for cow/calf producers and producers can increase value of a cull cow by 25-40% by management strategies alone. A producer can increase cull cow value by adding weight, improving quality and marketing cattle during seasonal price increases (Peel and Doye, 2008).

Adding weight to a cull cow not only increases total available pounds for resale, but also increases body condition. The market structure is broken-up so buyers can estimate fat cover and muscling at the auction. Categories are breakers, boners, lean and light type cull cows. A producer can increase value of a cow by moving her up in the slaughter categories by increasing dressing percentage especially if she is relatively heavy muscled, while at the same time they have increased total saleable pounds.

Traditionally, cull cow prices are affected seasonally, like all cattle prices. In the fall any spring calving cows that are open and have weaned a calf are the first to go. Cull cows flood the market

so a decrease is seen starting in July and August and continues on until November or later. So this gives a producer a window to aim for during late spring and early summer to capture value on cows culled from the herd. In the fall, when cow prices are traditionally at their lowest, spring cows are just weaning calves. The calf has increased the nutritional needs of that cow by over 20% when she is in lactation. So not only have we sold a cow in the fall when prices are low but also marketed her when she may be in a lesser desired body condition due to poor late season grass. If a producer can retain the cow after weaning to add weight and condition he can also add value.

A fall calving cow herd can match up much easier with these parameters. A producer can wean a calf in the spring put weight and condition on a cow with forage that is high in quality and hopefully readily available and still market that cow in the summer hitting our window of opportunity. This opportunity to add value also exists with a spring cow that lost a calf during pregnancy or calving and is not reproductively efficient for the cow herd and salvage value for the cow can be obtained fairly rapidly.

A spread sheet is available at <u>http://agecon.okstate.edu/faculty/publications/3078.xls</u> (Peel D.S. and D. Doye. 2008. Cull cow grazing and marketing opportunities. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Fact Sheet. AGEC 613.) for producers to consider their own situation. The fact is that producers may find that it is most cost effective to market cull cows immediately in times when forage availability is limited and feed prices are high, as in drought.

The bottom line is this: Producers need to identify cull cows ASAP. This may mean the use of early pregnancy detection or the use of a record keeping system that indicates a cow that is not efficient and needs to be removed from the herd even if she is pregnant. Once these animals are identified, then management decisions can be tailored to add value that meets a specific producer's needs.

Look Back at the Calving Season and Start to Make Improvements Now

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Only 1 to 2 months ago the spring calving cows were calving, the temperatures were colder and the calving pastures were covered with muck and manure. Experience would say that you do not want to ask cow calf operators how calving is then, because the response would be less than objective, reflecting bone-chilling cold and not enough sleep.

If you wait too long, perhaps until this fall, time will have mellowed most of the events and one soon has difficulty matching a calving season with particular problems. Now is perhaps the best time to make a few notes on what to change for next year.

The first step is to list the dead calves. Hopefully, your cattle are in a record system that will provide that information. If not, grab a piece of paper and pencil and list the calves. Your

calving notebook should have the dead calves checked off and a brief notation on what happened to each. Until all the calves are listed, the shock of lost opportunities has not had its full impact.

Can you identify a pattern of problems?

Was most of the death loss right at delivery and involved two-year old heifers? This could indicate that sire selection needs to be done more carefully, with attention being paid to low birth weight EPD sires for heifers. Perhaps the heifers were underdeveloped. This could contribute to more calving difficulty than necessary. Do you provide assistance to heifers after they have been in stage II of labor for one hour?

Was the death loss more prevalent after the calves had reached 5 days to 2 weeks of age? This of course often means that calf diarrhea (or scours) is a major concern. Calf scours will be more likely to occur to calves from first calf heifers. Calves that receive inadequate amounts of colostrum within the first 6 hours of life are 5 to 6 times more likely to die from calf scours. Calves that are born to thin heifers are weakened at birth and receive less colostrum which compounds their likelihood of scours. Often, these same calves were born via a difficult delivery and adds to the chances of getting sick and dying. All of this means that we need to reassess the bred heifer growing program to assure that the heifers were in a body condition score of 6 (moderate flesh) at calving time.

Do you use the same trap or pasture each year for calving? There may be a buildup of bacteria or viruses that contribute to calf diarrhea in that pasture. This particular calving pasture may need a rest for the upcoming calving season. Plus it is always a good idea to get new calves and their mothers out of the calving pasture as soon as they can be moved comfortably to a new pasture to get them away from other potential calf scour organisms. An excellent discussion of a method used to reduce calf diarrhea is available from the University of Nebraska website. Go to this link: <u>http://beef.unl.edu/beefreports/symp-2007-17-xx.shtml</u> online and learn more about the Nebraska Sandhill method of reducing calf scours.

Thanks to Dr. Kris Ringwall of North Dakota State University for this excellent suggestion to study the calf records now and start to make adjustments.

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