COW/CALF CORNER

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Forage Production Lagging in Oklahoma

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

Typically hot weather is expected in Oklahoma for the next week or so. Oklahoma has seen remarkably little hot weather so far and that has forage production behind schedule in the state. Recent rains in much of the state have resulted in very green conditions but pasture and hay growth has been delayed, especially for warm season forages. Delayed hay production is a concern to cattle producers who have severely depleted hay supplies during the last two years of drought.

The most recent USDA reports indicate that 69 percent of the first cutting of alfalfa hay was complete, compared to a 92 percent average for the same time. For other hay, 30 percent of the first cutting was completed, with 47 percent being average. Oklahoma pasture and range conditions included 33 percent rated poor to very poor, down slightly from 36 percent a week earlier. Warm weather will likely accelerate pasture and hay production in the coming weeks but delays so far may impact total annual yields.

Reduced hay production will limit the recovery of hay supplies. Both December and May 1 hay stocks were record low in the U.S. In Oklahoma, May 1 hay stocks were up from last year's dismal levels but were 28 percent below the 2002-2011 average for May 1. Hay disappearance between December 1, 2012 and May, 1 2013 (the difference between December 1 and May 1 hay stocks) in Oklahoma was 2.2 million tons, compared to a ten-year average of 3.5 million tons. This is the smallest hay use in Oklahoma since 1986. Even with herd liquidation that last two years, this is a small level of hay use. On a per cow basis, hay use this past winter was 1.22 tons per cow from December to May, which implies 16.3 pounds of hay per day per cow. The average winter hay use from 2002-2011 was 1.67 tons per cow, or 22.3 pounds of hay per cow per day. This reduction in hay supplies probably contributed to the observed increases in cow culling this spring in Oklahoma.

The same impacts occurred nationally with U.S. hay disappearance from December to May down 25 percent from the ten year average, resulting in per cow hay use of 21.6 pounds of hay

per cow per day, compared to the ten-year average of 26.91 pounds of hay per cow per day. This represents the smallest U.S. hay use per cow since 1986. This is likely a major contributor to increased U.S. beef cow slaughter since mid-March. In the last ten weeks, beef cow slaughter has averaged nearly 16 percent higher than last year bringing the year to date total to a three percent increase. It may also indicate that some heifers intended as replacements have been marketed as feeder heifers this spring. Though beef cow slaughter is expected to fall with improving pasture conditions, it would take a dramatic drop in beef cow slaughter for the remainder of the year along with increased heifer retention to avoid net liquidation for the year.

Weaning Fall-born Calves

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Many cow/calf operations with fall-born calves will wean the calves in mid to late June. Weaning during very hot summer weather is stressful enough to the calves. Therefore any management strategy that can reduce stress to the calves should be utilized. "Fenceline weaning" is such a strategy that should be applied.

California researchers weaned calves with only a fence (Fenceline) separating them from their dams. These were compared to calves weaned totally separate (Separate) from dams. Calf behaviors were monitored for five days following weaning. Fenceline calves and cows spent approximately 60% and 40% of their time, respectively within 10 feet of the fence during the first two days. During the first three days, Fenceline calves bawled and walked less, and ate and rested more, but these differences disappeared by the fourth day. All calves were managed together starting 7 days after weaning. After two weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 23 pounds more than Separate calves. This difference persisted since, after 10 weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 110 pounds (1.57 lb/day), compared to 84 pounds(1.20 lb/day) for Separate calves. There was no report of any differences in sickness, but calves that eat more during the first days after weaning should stay healthier. A follow-up study demonstrated similar advantages of fenceline contact when calves were weaned under drylot conditions and their dams had access to pasture. To wean and background, even for short periods, fenceline weaning should be considered. (Source: Price and co-workers. Abstracts 2002 Western Section of American Society of Animal Science.)

Here is an excellent summary of tips to minimize stress from weaning: (Source: <u>Mathis and</u> <u>Carter. New Mexico State University Guide B-221, Minimizing weaning stress on calves)</u>

- •Provide calves access to the weaning area (pen, trap, or pasture) a few weeks prior to weaning so calves do not undergo the stress of environment change at weaning. At weaning, move the cows to a new location when cows and calves are separated at weaning. Do not move the calves.
- •Allow fenceline contact for four to seven days following weaning. Fences should be sturdy and allow nose-to-nose contact while preventing nursing.

- •If fenceline weaning is not possible, move cows far enough away that they cannot hear the calves vocalizing.
- •If weaning in a drylot or corral, place feed bunks, hay, and water troughs along the fence to minimize perimeter walking and increase encounters with feed and water.
- •Placing large water troughs inside the pen and letting water troughs overflow slightly may attract calves to the water and help calves that are accustomed to drinking from live water sources adjust to troughs and to the sounds that occur when the float is activated.
- •Do not add unnecessary stress by castrating, dehorning, or branding calves at weaning. These practices should be completed at least three weeks before weaning and preferably prior to three months of age.

During the hot summer days, having adequate water available for the cattle is a **MUST**. Experienced ranchers that utilize fenceline weaning have found that having plenty of water in the region where the cattle are congregated can be a challenge. Plan ahead before you begin the weaning process to be certain that sufficient water can be supplied to both sides of the fence.

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