

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

The Newsletter

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# **Cold and Dry January Impacts Oklahoma Winter Grazing**

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After starting with considerable promise last fall, winter wheat grazing conditions deteriorated dramatically in January. Although some areas of the state did receive snow that carried beneficial moisture, the majority of the state has received less than 40 percent of normal precipitation since the beginning of the year including a large portion of the central and north-central part of the state receiving less than 20 percent of normal precipitation. As a result, dry conditions have spread from the already dry western region back into central and eastern areas of the state. The area of the state with some drought conditions (D0 or higher) increased from less than 50 percent of the state to over 70 percent of the state on the latest Drought Monitor map. Expanding drought conditions is mostly a threat of what can happen in another 60-90 days if conditions do not improve.

The biggest immediate is for the winter wheat crop, with grazing all but exhausted in many areas, especially the region north of Interstate 40. Grain yields are threatened now with dry conditions and cold temperatures increasing the potential for winter kill. The winter grazing season started well last fall with good prospects for the best winter grazing in several years. As a result more stocker cattle were placed on wheat pasture. The Oklahoma estimated feeder cattle supply on January 1 was 1.72 million head, up 4.9 percent from last year, indicating that more stocker cattle were brought into the state than in the past couple of years. The annual inventory report indicated a 20 percent increase in cattle grazing small grains pasture in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas on January 1.

However, forage production was limited through December and the cold temperatures in January stopped forage growth altogether. Many of the winter stockers have already moved to market in January. The 7-market feeder cattle auction total in January was up 23 percent compared to the same period last year. Not only were there more cattle out this winter, but more have already

been marketed. It is unlikely that a noticeable large wheat pasture run will develop in late February and early March.

The cold weather is also impacting cow-calf producers in Oklahoma. Feed requirements have been well above normal because of prolonged cold spells. Fortunately, Oklahoma producers had more hay available this winter. December 1 hay stocks in the state were up 34 percent over the record low levels of the previous two years. It appears that there is adequate hay for the winter, even with the larger cow herd and replacement heifer inventory in the state going into 2014. However, hay supplies may be mostly utilized by winter's end. Exhausted hay supplies and expanding winter drought conditions mean that spring weather conditions will be critical and will determine if current herd rebuilding plans can be sustained.

## Helping the Newborn Calf Breathe

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Despite our best efforts at bull selection and heifer development, cows or heifers occasionally need assistance at calving time. Every baby calf has a certain degree of respiratory acidosis. Acidosis is the result of the deprivation of oxygen and the accumulation of carbon dioxide that results from the passage of the calf through the birth canal. The excess of carbon dioxide results in a build-up of lactic acid (therefore the acidosis.) In order to correct the lack of oxygen and the excess of carbon dioxide and its by-products, the healthy calf will pant vigorously shortly after birth. Some calves, however, may be sluggish and slow to begin this corrective process.

It is imperative that the newborn calf begins to breathe as soon as possible. To stimulate the initiation of the respiratory process, a few ideas may help. First, manually clear the mouth and nasal passages of fluids and mucus. Traditionally, compromised calves were held up by their hind legs to allow fluid to drain from the airways, but now many veterinarians and animal scientists don't recommend this. Most of the fluid that drains from an upside-down calf is stomach fluid, important to health. Holding the calf by its hind legs also puts pressure on the diaphragm from abdominal organs, interfering with normal breathing. It's better to use a suction bulb to clear the airways.

Hanging the calf over a fence also is **NOT** a recommended method for a sluggish newborn. The weight of the calf on the fence restricts the movement of the diaphragm muscle. The fence impairs the diaphragm's ability to contract and move. This diaphragm activity is necessary to expand the lungs to draw in air and needed oxygen.

**A better method is to briskly tickle the inside of the nostrils of the calf with a straw.** This will usually cause the calf to have a reflex action such as a "snort" or cough. The reflex cough or "snort" expands the lungs and allows air to enter. Expect the calf to pant rapidly for a few minutes after breathing is initiated. Panting is the natural response that increases oxygen intake and carbon dioxide release and will allow the calf to reach normal blood gas concentrations.

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