

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Rebuilding Drought Threatens Oklahoma Herd Expansion

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

Oklahoma was one of a few states on January 1 showing the clearest signs of beef cow herd rebuilding. The Oklahoma beef cow herd was up 51,000 head (2.9 percent year over year), second only to Kansas and Missouri in the absolute increase in cow numbers. The Oklahoma inventory of beef replacement heifers was up 45,000 head (16.1 percent year over year), the largest increase in beef replacement heifers among states. Still, this increase in beef cow numbers is only a beginning. Oklahoma's beef cow herd is still down 10.5 percent from January 1, 2011. The rebuilding process has a long way to go.

The herd expansion plans currently in place are the result of significantly improved drought conditions in the second half of 2013. Though 2013 started dry, much of the state received close to average precipitation during the year. Forage conditions improved and the final weekly crop condition report in late November showed that range and pasture conditions were rated 40 percent fair and 40 percent good to excellent. At the end of 2013, the Drought Monitor showed that less than half of Oklahoma had any drought and less than 5 percent of the state had D3 or D4 (Extreme or Exceptional) drought. Hay production in Oklahoma recovered significantly in 2013 compared to the two previous years. December 1 hay stocks in Oklahoma were up 34 percent year over year from 2012 levels. This has provided sufficient hay to support the increased cow and heifer inventories. Better wheat pasture conditions in the fall of 2013 provided more winter grazing for stockers as well as cows and replacement heifers.

However, drought conditions have re-emerged back across central and eastern Oklahoma in January. From the western counties and the Panhandle where drought has been in place continuously for three years, 80 percent of the state now shows some level of drought conditions. Much of this drought is minor at this point with nearly 33 percent area only D0, i.e., abnormally dry. In early February, pasture and range rated good to excellent had dropped from 40 to 24 percent. The area of D3 and D4 drought has increased to 12.5 percent since the beginning of the year. As it still February, dry conditions now are not a major problem. If the conditions persist or expand for another 60-90, the threat will increase dramatically. This winter has included more cold and snowy weather than usual resulting in increased hay and supplement feeding. This may lead to relatively small hay carryover despite increased hay supplies this winter. Water reserves are still well below normal in many cases and critical shortages could develop quickly with warm and windy weather this spring.

Producers should do a feed assessment and develop a plan for the spring that includes decision points triggered by developing forage and water conditions. The most recent Climate Prediction Center drought forecast through May is somewhat encouraging. It suggests that drought may moderate in central and eastern Oklahoma, though drought is expected to persist in the western and Panhandle portions of Oklahoma. The extent of or lack of drought, in Oklahoma and in other regions as well, may affect cattle markets and will determine the cattle production and marketing alternatives that will be available to producers in 2014.

The Third Stage of Calving: Shedding of Fetal Membranes

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The process of “calving” or parturition in beef cattle is defined by three stages. Stage I occurs about 4 to 24 hours prior to calving. The major event during stage I is the dilation of the cervix. Stage II occurs in about 30 minutes in adult cows and about 1 hour in first calf heifers (when all goes well) and is the time when the calf passes through the birth canal and is delivered into the world. The third stage of calving is the shedding of the placenta or fetal membranes. In cattle this normally occurs in less than eight to 12 hours. The membranes are considered retained if after 12 hours they have not been shed. In some rare cases, the entire placenta is held in the uterus so there is no exposed portion. This condition may go unnoticed until the cow shows an abnormal uterine discharge or an odor characteristic of tissue degeneration.

Years ago it was considered necessary to remove the membranes by manually unbuttoning the attachments. However, research has shown that improper manual removal can be detrimental to uterine health and future conception rates. When a cow calf operator notices a cow that “did not clean” in 12 hours after calving, close observation is suggested. If the cow shows any signs of ill health, such as droopy ears, lethargic behavior, or poor appetite, this may indicate that an infection of the uterus has begun. **Contact your local large animal veterinarian for the proper management of retained placenta.** Administration of antibiotics usually will help against infection and the placenta will usually slough in four to seven days. More information about

working with cows and heifers at calving time can be found at the Oklahoma State University Extension publication [E-1006 "Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers"](#).

Quality Matters

Gant Mourer, Oklahoma State University's Beef Value Enhancement Specialist

No matter what business you're in, quality brings value to your product. It's no different in the beef industry except the definition of quality may differ slightly from producer to producer or segment to segment. Calves that have the genetic potential to gain and gain efficiently would by most be considered the second most important trait a calf can have from a commercial producer's standpoint. The most important trait being, that a calf is healthy and maybe more specifically alive. Producers have the resources and information available to make genetic decisions to meet any environmental or market demands they choose. Many producers have also spent years selecting for their genetics but if they don't manage calves well in the short term it will be all for not and quality will then be lacking.

If a calf does not remain healthy it will never reach its genetic potential. The most critical point in life of that calf is at weaning and how that calf is handled at that time. Bovine Respiratory Disease is the #1 production problem costing the beef industry over \$900 million dollars annually (Chirase and Greene, 2001). The fact of the matter is that we have the ability to do something about it. When we compare cattle that we do not know the vaccination history to cattle that have been Vac-45 verified the morbidity of those cattle goes from 41.9% to 9.5% and mortality is reduced from 3.1% to effectively 0%, respectively (Step et al. 2008). While, the 2007 survey of cow/calf producers from the National Animal Health Monitoring System shows that over 60% of operations don't vaccinate for respiratory disease prior to shipment.

Castration is important to the health of the calf as well and stress can be minimized for that calf if castration is done young and while still on the ranch. Calves that have been castrated prior to entry into feedlots and backgrounding yards typically perform better and experience lower morbidity and mortality rates as compared to bulls castrated upon arrival (Massey et al., 2011). We see a 8-10\$/cwt discount for bulls in livestock markets do to the fact that the breakeven in feedlots is about 6% less for 6 weight steers that went through a preconditioning program prior to arrival (Maxwell et al., 2012).

These management practices coupled with good nutrition and parasite control on the ranch can keep a calf gaining and adding value. This last fall, the value of added gain was up over a dollar in many instances and with a decrease in feed values, preconditioning was able to increase the value of a calf from 50-100\$/hd depending on the program and how long a producer retained ownership. Cattle enrolled in a VAC-45 program also took advantage of premiums of 7-8\$/cwt, just because of the documented health history (OQBN, 2013). This third party documentation and verification can be done with any number of health programs across the United States.

One fundamental change we are currently witnessing in the industry right now is that buyers are looking for cattle that are well managed and documented. Buyers feel they are not paying premiums, but rather discounting cattle not properly managed. These well managed cattle are

now the standard for cattle leaving the ranch. Buyers remember quality cattle and a ranch's reputation.

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