

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

From the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

March 9, 2015

In this Issue:

Forage planning to manage cost and enhance productivity

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

Schedule the breeding soundness exams soon

by Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Forage planning to manage cost and enhance productivity

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

The old saying is “hope for the best but plan for the worst”. When it comes to forage considerations for cow-calf producers I believe there is a need to plan for the worst...and plan for the best. And it’s not too early to begin forage planning for 2015. There are several reasons to plan now for the coming growing season including; opportunities to manage forage costs; opportunities to enhance forage productivity and total forage production in 2015; and opportunities to invest in long-term forage productivity. Blanket recommendations are not possible because of widely diverse geo-climatic regions and variability of individual situations within and across production environments. Oklahoma includes tremendous diversity in production environments that are representative of much of the country including native range and introduced pastures; warm and cool season forages; elevations from less than 300 feet to nearly 5000 feet; and precipitation from less than 15 inches to over 50 inches. Forage planning has value in every environment and every situation.

The continuing drought threat makes planning for the worst imperative. It is important to know the current health and situation of pastures. Some areas have been in persistent drought for four or more years and forage is weakened and needs time to recover. Realistic assessment of carrying capacity is critical even if average or better precipitation occurs this spring. In other cases drought conditions improved significantly last year only to regress this winter and threaten spring forage growth. Good hay stocks were reported going into the winter and many producers will have hay available to provide some flexibility this spring in the event of drought delayed or reduced forage production. It is important now to assess how much flexibility (time) will be available and determine decision triggers that will indicate when adjustments must be made in animal numbers. Should it become necessary: what animals will be sold? when? where? and how?

Planning now can reduce forage costs and enhance forage productivity in the event of average or better forage conditions. Grazing is almost always cheaper than hay and the quantity and quality of grazed forage as well as the length of the grazing season can be enhanced with careful planning regarding the timing, duration and stocking density of pastures. Fertilizer management of introduced pastures can be used to increase total production and stockpile late summer forage growth for extended grazing in the fall. Now is a good time to plan for how much hay is needed...not just how much can be produced. Hay is best used only when grazing is not possible and not as a substitute for grazing. Sometimes it seems that more hay production (and feeding) is used to justify owning haying equipment which is certainly a case of the tail wagging the dog...and expensive too! Cow-calf producers are expected to continue enjoying near record cattle revenues for some time to come but profit maximization still means that cost management is important. Good forage management is essential to optimize cattle production and take best advantage of today's cattle markets.

Strong cow-calf returns provide an opportunity to make some strategic investments in the long-term productivity of forage resources. For example, millions of acres of pasture in Oklahoma are infested with eastern red cedar leading to ever diminishing forage production; increased fire danger; and health problems such as allergies. There are many other invasive species that pose long-term threats to forage production and result in growing costs and loss of productivity. Now might be a good time to consider investing in strategic control of invasive species and implement a long-term management plan to control these pests. At the risk of getting a bit personal, I suggest that some extra expenses on cedar control or other strategic investments may be more valuable to the ranch than a new pickup as a way to reduce taxes this year.

Schedule the breeding soundness exams soon

by Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Although the spring calving season may still be ongoing, the next breeding season is only a few weeks away. Now is the time to schedule the old and new bulls for their pre-breeding soundness examination.

For the breeding soundness evaluation to be successful, bulls should be evaluated 30 to 60 days before the start of breeding. It is important to allow sufficient time to replace questionable bulls. Bulls could also be evaluated at the end of breeding to determine if their fertility decreased. A breeding soundness exam is administered by a veterinarian and includes a physical examination (feet, legs, eyes, teeth, flesh cover, scrotal size and shape), an internal and external examination of the reproductive tract, and semen evaluation for sperm cell motility and normality.

The physical examination studies overall appearance. Flesh cover is one factor to evaluate. Body condition can be affected by length of the breeding season, grazing and supplemental feeding conditions, number of cows the bull is expected to service and distance

required to travel during breeding. Ideally, bulls should have enough fat cover at the start of breeding so their ribs appear smooth across their sides. A body condition score 6 (where 1 = emaciated and 9 = very obese) is the target body condition prior to the breeding season.

Sound feet and legs are very important because if they are unsound, this can result in the inability to travel and mount for mating. The general health of the bull is critical since sick, aged and injured bulls are less likely to mate and usually have lower semen quality. The external examination of the reproductive tract includes evaluation of the testes, spermatic cords and epididymis. Scrotal circumference is an important measure since it is directly related to the total mass of sperm producing tissue, sperm cell normality and the onset of puberty in the bull. Bulls with large circumference will produce more sperm with higher normality and also reach sexual maturity sooner.

Examination of the external underline before and during semen collection will detect any inflammation, foreskin adhesions, warts, abscesses and penile deviations. The internal examination is conducted to detect any abnormalities in the internal reproductive organs. Also, be certain to ask your veterinarian about the need to test the bulls for the reproductive disease, trichomoniasis. Learn more about this disease by downloading and reading [OSU Fact Sheet VTMD-9134 "Bovine Trichomoniasis"](#).

The semen evaluation is done by examining a sample of the semen under a microscope. The veterinarian will estimate the percentage of sperm cells that are moving in a forward direction. This estimate is called "motility". In addition, the sperm cells will be individually examined for proper shape or "morphology". Less than 30 percent of the cells should be found to have an abnormal shape.

Any bull meeting all minimum standards for the physical exam, scrotal size and semen quality will be classed as a "satisfactory" potential breeder. Many bulls that fail any minimum standard will be given a rating of "classification deferred." This rating indicates that the bull will need another test to confirm status. Mature bulls (that were listed as classification deferred) should be retested after four to six weeks. Mature bulls will be classified as unsatisfactory potential breeders if they fail subsequent tests. Young bulls that are just reaching puberty may be rated as "classification deferred", and then later meet all of the minimum standards. Therefore caution should be exercised when making culling decisions based on just one breeding soundness exam.

Many producers work hard to manage their cows for high fertility. They may assume that the bulls will do their expected duties. However, it's important to pay close attention to bulls to establish successful breeding.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services. References within this publication to any specific commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, service mark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not constitute or imply endorsement by Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.