

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Keep or cull open replacement heifers?? (and buyer beware!)

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For some Oklahoma cow calf operations, the bulls go into the breeding pasture with replacement heifers in mid-April. As the bulls are being removed from the replacement heifers in two months, this would be an ideal time to call and make arrangements with your local veterinarian to have those heifers evaluated for pregnancy after another 60 days. In two months after the breeding season, experienced palpators should have no difficulty identifying which heifers are pregnant and which heifers are not pregnant (open). Those heifers that are determined to be "open" after this breeding season, should be strong candidates for culling.

Culling these heifers immediately after pregnancy checking serves three very useful purposes.

- 1) Identifying and culling "open" heifers early will remove sub-fertile females from the herd. Lifetime cow studies were conducted at a USDA experiment station in Montana. Over the span of 23 years, 1589 replacement heifers were exposed to bulls. Over that number of years 266 heifers were found to be "open" after their first breeding season. All of these "open" heifers were kept in the herd for an average of about 4 years. From the 1006 opportunities to become pregnant that followed, only 551 calves were produced. In other words, when the heifers that failed to breed in the first breeding season were followed throughout their lifetimes, they averaged a 54.9% yearly calf crop. Despite the fact that reproduction is not a highly heritable trait, it also makes sense to remove this genetic material from the herd so as to not proliferate females that are difficult to get bred.
- 2) Culling open heifers early will reduce production costs. If the rancher waits until next spring to find out which heifers do not calve, the winter feed expense will still be lost and there will be no

calf to help eventually pay the bills. This is money that can better be spent in properly feeding cows that are pregnant and will be producing a salable product at weaning time.

- 3) Identifying the open heifers shortly (60 days) after the breeding season is over will allow for marketing the heifers while still young enough to go to a feedlot and be fed for the “choice” beef market. The grading change of several years ago had a great impact on the merchandising of culled replacement heifers. "B" maturity carcasses (those estimated to be 30 months of age or older) are much less likely to be graded choice. Therefore, it is imperative to send heifers to the feedlot while they are young enough to be fed for 4 to 5 months and not be near the "B" maturity age group.

Certainly the percentage of open heifers will vary from ranch to ranch. Do not be concerned, if after a good heifer development program and adequate breeding season, that you find that 10% of the heifers still are not bred. These are the very heifers that you want to identify early and remove from the herd. Resist the temptation to “roll them over” to a fall-calving herd if they have failed to breed in a spring breeding season.

Producers that are buying replacement females (at a quite hefty price) need to be wary of heifers that were exposed to bulls or artificial insemination/clean-up bulls and remain non-pregnant. This is the easiest opportunity to become pregnant that they will have. If they are still open after that first breeding season, they may be infertile at worst, or sub-fertile compared to other heifers. Remember the old Montana data that suggests that they will be 55% calf crop females the rest of their lives.

Oklahoma forage conditions improving

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

Most of Oklahoma has received significant rain the past 10 days with totals generally ranging from one to three inches, with localized totals over 8 inches. Some of the best rain fell in some of the worst drought area of western Oklahoma. Much of northern Texas and the Texas Panhandle also received good rain. While this moisture does not eliminate all the drought conditions, the timing is superb for forage growth, not to mention the wheat crop in the region.

This moisture ensures initial forage growth in warm-season pastures and provides producers an opportunity to assess the health of those rangelands after extended periods of stress. The temptation will be to stock pastures too heavily and too early. Patience and discipline are needed to ensure forage recovery and long term productivity. However, producers may finally be able to plan production offensively compared to being always on the defense.

Cattle and beef markets have continued strong on continued tight supplies. Calf and stocker prices have holding close to spring highs on good summer grazing demand, which may be extended a bit with the recent rains. Limited numbers of wheat graze-out feeder cattle will be marketed over the next month, mostly in May. Feeder cattle prices have been steady; limited by the sharp discount on deferred Live Cattle futures. Cull cow prices in April are about 9 percent

higher than this time last year on reduced cow slaughter. Total cow slaughter is down 7.3 percent for the year to date compared to one year ago, with a 1.9 percent increase in dairy cow slaughter partially offsetting a 17.5 percent year over year decrease in beef cow slaughter. Total steer and heifer slaughter is down 6.8 percent for the year to date from last year, with heifer slaughter down 7.6 percent so far this year. Reduced heifer and cow slaughter in 2015 suggests that herd expansion is continuing.

Choice boxed beef averaged the fourth highest weekly average in history last week with Select boxed beef at the fifth highest weekly average. Fed cattle traded lower at \$160-\$161/cwt. in the southern plains last week. Seasonal supplies will build into May and June and push fed cattle prices lower into summer but how much lower is a question. Feedlot placements have been down year over year for 11 of the past 12 months and were down 7.5 percent in the November through February period. This is a total of 536 thousand head fewer cattle placed over the four months. Placements are expected to be down again for March in the upcoming April Cattle on Feed report. Live Cattle futures have stubbornly maintained a sharp discount to current cash markets based on normal seasonal summer price declines and beef demand concerns. Reduced placements in recent months suggest that seasonal supply pressure will be less than typical going into summer and, despite record wholesale and retail beef price ratios to other meats, there is little indication that beef prices are weakening relative to pork and poultry prices for the foreseeable future. I suspect that fed cattle prices will get through the summer at higher levels than futures currently indicate, likely averaging in the mid to upper \$150 range.

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