COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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In this Issue:

Drought reset in the Southern Plains

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May 2015 was not only the wettest May on record but was the wettest month ever in Oklahoma. The statewide average was nearly 15 inches of rain in May with numerous locations receiving over 20 inches and a few areas with over two feet of rain. This far exceeds the previous record for the statewide average of about 10.5 inches in May. The resulting floods continue and are causing losses for people and creating management headaches for agricultural producers. Summer crop planting and hay harvest are delayed and the winter wheat crop, nearing harvest, is now threatened by wet conditions after suffering from drought impacts through most of the growing season. Fences have been washed out and some cattle are scattered while others had to be relocated to higher ground. Stored hay has been ruined by flood waters or washed away in some cases.

The tremendous amount of precipitation in May has all but eliminated drought conditions in Oklahoma. The drought that began in the fall of 2010 has remained a specter over Oklahoma agriculture for over four and a half years until this last month. During that time, even when periodic relief came and marginally improved conditions allowed for forage and crop production, the threat of regressing back into drought was a constant factor in producer decision making and a limit to production plans. Agricultural producers have been continuously on the defensive through the long drought.

By recharging soil moisture and replenishing surface water supplies, the record rainfall in May has effectively reset all drought indicators to zero. It may turn hot and dry this summer and we may be concerned about drought conditions later in the year or for next year, but it will be a new drought rather than a continuation of the previous drought. Starting from this point, any new drought conditions that might emerge will take time to reach critical levels and provide producers an opportunity to plan and prepare. Until or unless that happens, producers can be

back on the offensive, focusing on what they would like to do, as opposed to what they have been forced to do so much of the time for the past four years.

One of many questions that accompany this change in conditions is how this might impact herd rebuilding. In general, I don't expect this to change the trajectory of herd rebuilding already underway in 2015. Oklahoma started 2015 with a 25 percent year over year increase in beef replacement heifers, indicating relatively aggressive herd expansion. Perhaps the biggest impact is that it removes the risk that some producers were facing by gambling on relatively aggressive expansion plans this year. Improved forage conditions ensure that robust herd expansion in 2015, already planned, will occur. Better 2015 conditions may, however, set the stage for a more aggressive expansion in 2016 than would have otherwise occurred. This could push already strong heifer retention in 2015 to even higher levels, keeping feeder supplies tight and supporting feeder cattle prices even more in 2015.

Wet pastures and foot rot

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Spring rains have filled the ponds and now the summer grass is ready to start growing vigorously. As the temperatures heat up, cattle will start to congregate around or in the ponds or other standing water. One of the challenges that cattle producers may face this summer is the occasional lame cow or yearling. "Foot rot" is a common cause of lameness in beef cattle on pastures. Foot rot is an infection that starts between the toes of the infected animal and usually is a result of the introduction of a bacteria through broken skin. The infection causes pain and the resulting lameness. The lameness can cause decreases in weight gain of young cattle, milk production decline of adult cows and lame bulls will be reluctant to breed.

Treatment of foot rot can be successful when the treatment is started early in the disease process. Most cases require the use of systemic antimicrobial therapy. Your local large animal veterinarian will advise you on recommended antibiotics and dosages for your situation. Severely infected animals that do not respond to initial treatments will need to be re-evaluated by the veterinarian and more involved treatments may be required to salvage the animal. There are other causes of lameness. Therefore a proper diagnosis is important before treatment begins.

Preventative measures revolve around prevention of mechanical damage to the foot. Recently brush-hogged weeds or brush stubble will often be very sharp and cut the skin between the toes allowing the entrance of the infective bacteria. Avoid forcing cattle to spend long periods of time standing in very wet lots or pastures. Utilizing a good mineral program that contains the micro minerals zinc, selenium, and copper will aid in disease prevention. A three year study in Kansas has shown that zinc methionine added to a free choice mineral supplement reduced the incidence of foot rot in steers grazing summer pasture .

Because cattle inflicted with foot rot are commonly treated with antibiotics, it is critical that producers follow their veterinarian's instructions and label directions precisely. Record the date, the dosage, route of administration, the lot number of the antibiotic given and the person giving

the treatment. Then observe the drug withdrawal times completely before marketing the animals that have been treated. Read more about foot rot in cattle by downloading the Oklahoma State University Fact Sheet ANSI 3355 "Foot Rot in Cattle".

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