

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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The Price Paid for Less Drought in Oklahoma

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Perhaps the surest sign that the drought in Oklahoma has been severely dented is the return of severe weather that reminds us why Oklahoma is the heart of Tornado Alley. The latest round of storms this last week culminated in deadly tornados and record rain totals in central and eastern Oklahoma which added to the grisly human toll for the month of May 2013. These recent conditions are a direct contrast to the noticeable reduction in severe weather in Oklahoma since the drought began in late 2010. The devastation that many individuals, families, businesses and agricultural operations have been subjected to is part of the price that accompanies improvement in agricultural conditions in Oklahoma. My thoughts and best wishes are directed to all those who have suffered the brunt of Oklahoma's May fury.

The diversity of crop, forage, and livestock production activities in Oklahoma all reflect the typical weather pattern that often includes the violent weather we have experienced recently. Much of the eastern two-thirds of the state have seen significant recharge of soil moisture that will support summer crop and forage production. Very importantly for cattle production, the intense rainfall has filled surface water supplies in many areas though coverage is variable. Producers are now able to assess their forage conditions, in many cases for the first time since 2010 and develop management plans for recovery. In some situations, perennial forage has been lost in whole or in part due to drought. In other cases, perennial forage is overwhelmed by annual weeds and grasses that provide specific management challenges. In the past two years, large quantities of hay have been brought into Oklahoma, often from very distant sources. Producers should be alert to new weed or other plant species that may have been inadvertently introduced to Oklahoma pastures and may pose new management challenges. Though the drought threat is not eliminated, many producers can begin to move forward with recovery, restoration and rebuilding their cattle operations.

The drought, however, is by no means gone from Oklahoma. The drought line now extends roughly 2-3 counties in from the western border of Oklahoma including the Oklahoma Panhandle and back into north central counties along the Kansas border. This, roughly one-third of the state, includes areas that have seen relatively little of the recent moisture and remain in

severe to exceptional drought. This region includes typically drier regions dominated by native range. Rangeland in this region is enduring the third summer of drought and remains in extremely poor condition with the level of long-term or permanent damage unknown at this time. Though the drought challenges continue very severe in this region, the improvement in central and eastern Oklahoma should provide some indirect help by making alternative sources of forage and hay more accessible and closer compared to the past two years.

Much of Oklahoma has experienced welcome, though costly, improvement in agricultural conditions in recent weeks. Producers in these areas can begin think about restoring business in a more normal fashion while producers in continuing drought areas continue to endure and survive while waiting to see if the drought continues to move west.

"Preg" Check and Cull Replacement Heifers Early

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Many Oklahoma ranchers choose to breed the replacement heifers about a month ahead of the mature cows in the herd. In addition, they like to use a shortened 45 to 60-day breeding season for the replacement heifers. The next logical step is to determine which of these heifers failed to conceive in their first breeding season. This is more important today than ever before.

As the bulls are being removed from the replacement heifers, this would be an ideal time to call and make arrangements with your local veterinarian to have those heifers evaluated for pregnancy in about 60 days. In two months, 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 economically valuable purposes.

1) Identifying and culling open heifers early will **remove sub-fertile females from the herd**. Lifetime cow studies from Montana indicated that properly developed heifers that were exposed to fertile bulls, but DID NOT become pregnant were often sub-fertile compared to the heifers that did conceive. In fact, when the heifers that failed to breed in the first breeding season were followed throughout their lifetimes, they averaged a 55% 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 summer forage and winter costs**. If the rancher waits until next spring to find out which heifers do not calve, the pasture use and winter feed expense will still be lost and there will be no calf to eventually help 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 the following fall.

3) Identifying the open heifers shortly after (60 days) 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. "B" maturity carcasses (those estimated to be 30 months of age or older) are very unlikely to be graded Choice and cannot be graded Select. As a result, the heifers that are close

to two years of age will suffer a price discount. If we wait until next spring to identify which two year-olds did not get bred, then we will be culling a female that will be marketed at a noticeable discount compared to the price/pound that she would have brought this summer as a much younger animal.

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. Resist the temptation to keep these open heifers and “roll them over” to a fall-calving herd. These are the very heifers that you want to identify early and remove from the herd. It just makes good economic business sense to identify and cull non-pregnant replacement heifers as soon as possible.

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