

Management Update

Cattle Management Practices For Difficult Times

I can't remember a time when the grass has been as green, the cows have been as fat, ponds have been as full, and producers have been as worried about their future and the future of agriculture as a whole. The really frustrating part about the predicament we find in mid-2008 is that so many of the contributing factors are beyond our control. It is easier to deal with a crisis when it is an act of Mother Nature (e.g., the drought of 2005 and 2006) than when fingers can be pointed at something tangible (e.g., individuals, groups or policies) that results in hardships, however unintended they may be. Seemingly, the only silver lining is that calf prices have stabilized and are staying relatively strong.

At the forefront of every agricultural producer's mind right now are the three F's: FUEL, FEED and FERTILIZER. There has been considerable brainstorming conducted at all levels of agriculture (producer, industry and academia), and there are no easy solutions to these problems. However, to implement a "glass half-full" attitude, there are opportunities that come with these hardships, but you have to be in a position to take advantage of them.

Specific to cattle producers, there are management practices that cost nothing or very little to implement, but that can have dramatic financial benefits. A truly profitable cattle producer is one that not only does a good job of increasing revenue, but monitors costs as well - a point that far too

often gets overlooked. These practices are often discussed in industry publications, producer meetings and in personal interactions. However, I have found that the harder the times, the more openminded we get. So, here again are some strategies for your consideration.

Dehorn calves prior to marketing. I bought a pair of dehorners the other day for around \$20, and I have only seen a couple ever broken. Data collected by Oklahoma State University suggests that by doing this simple procedure, you will increase sale prices by \$3/cwt.

Castrate bull calves prior to marketing. This requires minimal labor, but, by doing so, data indicate that sale prices will be raised by about \$3.50/cwt.

Cull open cows. It is important to optimize cow weight and flesh when doing so. There are times when it makes sense to feed a cow to increase flesh or get to a better market. However, each year is different, so calculate your costs and let the numbers answer this question.

Pull your bulls or cull later-calving cows. Smaller producers may choose the latter because a place to put a bull is lacking, while larger producers can usually dedicate infrastructure to bulls during the off-season very easily. The point here is that, regardless of size, this practice can be implemented. The resulting "defined" calving season will save in both labor and feed costs, not to mention a more uniform calf crop.

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Produce calves to fit a predetermined market. This is a frame of mind and starts with your breeding program. In times like these, you need to have a really good reason not to have crossbred cows in your pasture, running with a really good bull that you know something about.

Keep records to help make management and marketing decisions. Simply keeping first and last calf birth dates opens marketing options and doesn't take a lot of effort.

Obviously, this is not an all-encompassing list and you may be thinking, "How come he didn't mention this or that?" That's the point of this article - to get you thinking of ways to be more efficient without spending a lot of time or money. Being creative and critical will go a long way in these difficult times. I suggest that, if you are not doing the things listed above, you have a pretty good place to start.

By: Evan Whitley

Creep Feeding Before Weaning

Historically, feeder calf prices decline as weight increases. That relationship of price to weight still exists, but it has narrowed considerably due to the high price of corn and feedlot cost of gain. Feedlots and the market are telling us to make calves heavier at home before selling them as feeder calves.

For several months now, producers who have been able to put economical gains on feeder calves have been paid for their efforts at marketing. At the cow-calf level, many pro-

ducers have expressed interest in creep feeding spring-born calves between now and weaning to make them heavier at that time. It is pretty easy to put an additional 25-30 pounds on the calves during the next 75 days by creep feeding. The question is whether or not the economics work. During the hot summer months, we usually have one of two forage situations: adequate volume, but low quality; or low volume and low quality. Here are analyses for these two scenarios and the implications for creep feeding.

Low quality, adequate volume forage: Research at Oklahoma State University has shown a consistent economical creep in this situation using a salt-limited, high protein feed (cottonseed meal). This trial showed a conversion of 2.79 pounds of feed per additional pound of gain. With cottonseed meal at \$350/T, here's what it looks like:

Table 1

Feed consumption	0.88 pounds/day x 75 days = 66 pounds
Feed cost	\$0.154/day x 75 days = \$11.55
Increased cost	0.3 pounds x 75 days = 23 pounds more weaning weight
Value of additional gain	\$0.61 x 23 pounds = \$14.03
Net	\$2.48/head

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Table 2

Feed consumption	3.5 pounds/day x 75 days = 263 pounds
Feed cost	\$0.30/day x 75 days = \$22.50
Increased cost	0.38 pounds x 75 days = 28.5 pounds more weaning weight
Value of additional gain	\$0.61 x 28.5 pounds = \$17.38
Net	-\$5.12/head

This net figure doesn't include any fixed or other variable costs, so it's probably a break-even proposition.

Low quality, low volume forage: OSU researchers also summarized several trials using a 14-16 percent creep feed. In this scenario, conversions averaged about 9 pounds of feed per pound of additional gain. A commercial 14 percent creep will cost about \$205/T; a byproduct blend of about the same analysis, \$195/T. Using an average of the two of \$200/T, here's the analysis:

With high calf prices and high feed prices, and the assumptions I've made, mid- to late-season creep feeding will not pay at this time. However, one advantage to creep feeding is the fact that the calves tend to get on feed quicker, stay healthier and out-perform non-creep fed calves during the first 30-45 days after weaning. *By: Clay Wright*

Cow Calf: Fall Born Calves Have Lighter Birth Weights

The beginning of August reminds us that the fall calving season is not far away. Most fall calving cows are in excellent body condition because of the availability and quality of standing forage in the pastures. Some producers may be misled into believing that the fall-calving cow, in a body condition score of 6 or better, will have a larger birth weight calf because of the excellent nutrition during pregnancy. However, research data does not confirm this belief.

Oklahoma State University researchers used five years of data from the North Lake Carl Blackwell range to answer the question of birth weight differences due to seasons. Records of 414 live births (242 spring and 172 fall) from cows of five crossbred cow groups were analyzed for differences in birth weight. The cows ranged in age from 4 to 7 years old. All cows were bred artificially to the same Salers and Limousin bulls. Fall calving cows delivered smaller birth weight calves (77.7 pounds) than did spring calving cows (82.2 pounds).

The reason that fall calving cows have lighter birth weights is generally attributed to the fact that the cows are gestating in hot weather. Blood flow patterns of cattle during periods of high temperatures change in an effort to dissipate heat from the body. Blood (and the nutrients that it carries) is shunted to the outer extremities during hot weather to dissipate heat. Therefore less blood flow is sent to the inner core of the cow where the fetus is gestating. This subtle change in blood flow is commonly thought to be the reason that lighter birth weights occur to cattle that are in the last trimester of pregnancy in June, July, and August. The small amount of difference noted in Oklahoma cattle did not cause a loss of viability of calves born in September and October. *Source: Selk and Buchanan, 1990 OSU Animal Science Research Report.* ■