

by Kris Ringwall

While we are dry in the upper Great Plains, much of cattle country, especially the eastern and western portions of the U.S., have adequate moisture and feed supply.

On a long drive from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, through Montana and over to eastern North Dakota, the contrast was vivid: The situation was good for those who have grass and disappointing for those who do not.

In late June the Dickinson Research Extension Center began reducing inventory, selling 66 yearling steers at the local auction. Historically, we grazed these yearling steers into early December and then placed them in a feedyard for early spring finishing. The marketing-date shift limits income opportunity, but the reduction is part of the center's long-term grazing plan in response to drought.

The heart of the center's plan is to keep 70% of its resources more stable and 30% more flexible. In the good years, the flexible cattle add opportunity; in the dry years such as this year, the center loses opportunity but avoids intrusion into long-term center objectives.

The same approach could be applied to producer drought plans. Yearling cattle make good flex cattle. Drought is a stark reality in the

semiarid area of southwestern North Dakota. A drought plan is a necessity for the grass-dependent.

The steers' pastures will rest with the anticipation of rain so cows and calves can graze later this summer. Rain will come; we just do not know when. Moisture brings grass and hay, and those without them look for some accessibility of grass and hay from the areas that have adequate moisture.

Trucks today can deliver feed that helps fine-tune rations and tweak some grazing plans to give a producer time when pastures are dry. Keep in mind additional inputs come with a cost, and reality always must be noted if one opts to incur more expense versus converting cattle to income.

The center is not planning on early weaning, but pulling the calves off the cows in late August to mid-September is a potential option. The center calves in May and June, so that circumstance would put the calves past the 3-months-of-age window and certainly eligible for weaning.

Caring for early weaned calves

In anticipation, I contacted North Dakota State University Extension area livestock specialist Karl Hoppe for a better understanding of caring for early weaned calves.

"Early weaned calf rations need not be complex, although using a multitude of feed ingredients is certainly an option," Hoppe said.

He also noted a major challenge: "The main item to remember is the calf was receiving a substantial amount of nutrients from milk. High energy, high protein, fat, vitamins and minerals from the milk are supplementing the grass, hay or creep feed the calf is also eating. The early weaned calf ration needs to have enough energy, most likely sourced from grain, to replace the energy that was being provided by milk."

For the center, and most livestock operations, grain can be blended with the various forage components, but the lack of higher-quality forages also is an issue when moisture is short.

Remember, the early weaned calf does not eat much. Purchasing higher-quality hay to blend with local grain certainly would be a good option. And one may want to consider purchasing a commercially available feed.

"An early weaned calf does have a functioning rumen, but the rumen may not be developed as much as needed," Hoppe said. "Energy that is fermented into volatile fatty acids in the rumen stimulates growth of the rumen villi, which leads to more absorption of nutrients. In addition, feeding forage

increases the muscles in the rumen walls. So both forage and grain are needed for proper rumen development.

"You might think that the milk should provide the energy to grow rumen villi," he continued. "However, nursing calves have a muscle reflex called the esophageal groove that directs the milk into the abomasum (true stomach). Milk is absorbed directly by the small intestine instead of being fermented in the rumen. Some milk does spill into the rumen as the calf's rumen matures and the groove's closure reflex is not as complete."

Early weaned calves, like preconditioned calves, need to be adapted physically and behaviorally to the new environment.

"Young calves also eat what they have been exposed to," Hoppe said. "If they have never seen a feed bunk or corn, it may take several days before they try the feed. Meanwhile, they fill up on hay that provides a huge belly but limits nutrients for growth. A complete ration will limit sorting at the feed bunk. Feed intake limiters that use grain are an excellent choice for starting out hungry calves that have never seen grain."

When early weaning, prepare in advance, and consult your local nutritionist and veterinarian for a positive experience. **HW**

Start Planning for Next Year: Pregnancy Check Cows Early

Mother Nature has changed everything — again.

The Upper Midwest's dry-to-drought conditions have changed stocking rates, challenged pasture rotation schedules, hastened the end-grazing date, and limited cow and calf condition scores. Producers need to work through the present and take steps to minimize the effects of this year's drought on next year's production.

By weaning and pregnancy checking early, thin, pregnant cows have a chance to improve condition after weaning. Move out any open or late-bred cows. Wean the calf early, and pay attention to the markets for when to sell the calf.

An important point still remains: Much of the country is not short on feed, and timely marketing in response to the broader market trends is important. Finding a way to hold the calves to allow for a good market strategy is good common sense. But keeping the calves gaining in a dry lot takes some homework. For now, focus on the cow, and wisely stretch the feed on the good keeper cows.

The cows will not come off in normal condition, and do not put off what is inevitable — thin pregnant cows. So start looking at feed resources, and once the calves are weaned — earlier than later this fall — the dry cow needs to put back on some condition.

The nutritional requirements of a cow whose calf was weaned are lower when milk production ceases. So the thought for the day is this: If one buys feed, why not plan on feeding when the cow can better use the feed?

Waiting to add condition to a thin cow is difficult. The cow advances daily in fetal growth. The third trimester of pregnancy will be here soon, and the cow will need to be eating to support the accelerated growth of the calf. Plus, the potential harshness of the upcoming winter will demand more thermal output to survive. Her daily feed intake will be needed to keep the unborn calf growing and to stoke her internal furnace for heat.

To make matters worse, as soon as she calves next spring, all hands on deck because milk production kicks in as the cow turns into a perpetual milking machine. Feed in, milk out is not a time to be in poor condition. So when hay is expensive, feed it when it will do the most good — this coming fall. And do not rule out additional pasture supplements, or dry lot the cows and add grain to the ration this fall.

Again, the point is that thin cows gain weight in the fall with less feed. The cow is pregnant, but the fetus is not quite so demanding. In the fall the cow does not have to set aside some of what she eats to simply keep warm. She

feels good, not like in late pregnancy when she has to carry well in excess of 100 to 200 lb. of extra weight balanced on legs with a pelvis meant to come apart on short notice.

Caring for the cow

The bottom line: Be nice to the cow, and let her gain a little weight and put some flesh on this fall. Traditional timing and the business of upcoming fall work can cause one to miss this point. Skimping, skimping and skimping some more and hoping the cows will survive until grass next spring is poor planning.

Thin cows always have that same look while walking single file, looking for feed where none is available, cautious with slight anxiety. Early weaned, those thin cows have a chance to gain some easy weight.

Contrary to the tendency to let the cows rough it a little more in the nice weather, saving feed for winter, is not a good idea. While some think every week of saving feed is money in the pocket, that is not exactly true once a producer has made the needed cuts in inventory.

In summary, cows calving in March and April enter the third trimester in December and January, respectively. One can feed to the nutritional requirements of the beef cow; however, the many extenuating circumstances in late

pregnancy and winter simply may not allow the replenishing of condition and muscle lost during a very dry summer.

This process starts a vicious cycle, where if the cows are calved too thin, the calves will be deprived of adequate colostrum, calves get sick and the cows do not rebreed on time to maintain a 365-day calving interval.

If this cycle repeats itself next year, the culling rate goes up and the overall health of the cow, and particularly the calf, is put in jeopardy, so do not skimp in hopes of saving a few dollars. Reduce the cow numbers to meet the current estimated feed inventory.

This all seems to be rather complicated, but Mother Nature is tough, and running a business with Mother Nature as the primary partner is not easy. Passive planning and response is not the answer.

Decide today to visit your local Extension agent or nutritionist. Invest in feed cautiously, and target feed for the best cow response. Aggressively deal with inventory numbers, plan for next spring now and remember that when the weather is nice and the cows are thin, feed them. **HW**

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