



Managing the Beef Herd During Drought Conditions: Part I

Dr. Jeff Lehmkuhler, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist

Extremely dry growing conditions throughout the area have put many producers in a difficult situation. Beef cattle operations are seeing limited if any pasture growth and will likely need to be considering options. The following discussion will touch briefly on several items to consider regarding managing the beef herd during this period of limited precipitation. This is the first segment of a brief series. Additional information regarding these topics can be obtained from the author or your local county extension office.

Monitor Body Condition Score

It is important to monitor the body condition of the cow herd even during years of adequate precipitation. Body condition scoring for the beef herd is on a 1 to 9 scale with 1 corresponding to a very thin, unthrifty animal while a 9 is an extremely obese animal. Cows normally will lose a body condition score or more during the lactation period as energy for milk production can exceed the energy they consume. Ideally, cows will be in adequate body condition near a 5 or 6 prior to calving. Heifers are often managed to be one body condition score above the cows at calving and breeding. This is to ensure animals will be bred back to calve the following year as previous research has illustrated a strong relationship between body condition score and reproductive success. Additionally, thin cows at calving have been shown to produce lower levels of antibodies in the colostrum which is important for protection of the newborn calf. One body condition score is near 100 lbs of live weight and increasing the body condition score rapidly is difficult without significant grain inputs. Therefore, it is recommended that producers monitor body condition scores rather than attempting to add a significant amount of weight over a short time frame.

Creep Feeding

Offering supplemental feed to the calf can stretch the forage slightly. Research has shown a substitution of forage towards creep feed when offered to calves. This will increase the available forage to the cows slightly. Creep feeding can also reduce the acclimation time required post-weaning especially if the same creep feed is offered during the weaning process. Additionally, creep feeding will maintain calf gains as the forage quality declines by supplying increased energy and protein intakes. When creep feeding during dry conditions, it is encouraged that calves be monitored frequently for signs of excessive consumption of creep feed. Over eating can result in bloat, acidosis, foundering or excessively fleshy calves that might be discounted when marketed. Highly digestible fibrous feedstuffs such as soybean hulls, corn gluten feed, wheat middlings and dried distillers grains can be fed successfully in creep diets. Conventional feedstuffs such as corn and oats will also work nicely when developing a creep diet for calves. Many manufacturers offer fibrous creep feeds that can be purchased and delivered straight to



the feeder. When creep feeding, it is important to monitor the creep feeder and do not let it stand empty. Empty feeders can increase the risk of digestive disorders due to over eating when the feeders are refilled. As always, producers are encouraged to consider the economics of creep feeding with respect to feed costs, cattle markets, and labor resources.

Early Weaning

If body condition score begins to slip rapidly due to short forage supplies, one might consider early weaning the calf crop. Early weaning will reduce the energy demand for lactation of the cow. It is more efficient to feed the weaned calf than it is the cow with respect to feed inputs. Young and thin cows might be considered as the first candidates to be weaned. Calves can be weaned at any age given that proper management post-weaning is provided. Beef calves that are early weaned are commonly 60 days or older with many of them being 90-120 days of age. When considering early weaning, it is advised that the normal processing steps be considered as if weaning at the conventional time. Pre-weaning vaccines should be administered as normal with boosters given at weaning or according to your manufacturers label in conjunction with your veterinarian's guidance. Castration and dehorning management may need to be altered due to concerns with fly control. Delaying these management tasks until later in the fall may be advised.

Weaning calves can be accomplished by conventional means in which calves are separated from the cows and transported to a different location or via fenceline weaning in which the dams and calves are separated by a sturdy fence allowing visual contact. It is better to move the cows than the calves as it reduces the stress by keeping the calves in a familiar environment with common feedstuffs and reduces exposure to other pathogens during this stressful period. However, this may not always be advisable if fences are not adequate to hold calves, pastures are short, lack of adequate water and other factors. Additional information on early weaning can be obtained from UW Extension or at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/animalscience/beef/Resources/ProductionMgt/index.html>.

Managing your resources become more challenging as drought conditions worsen. In the next series will discuss alternatives to feeding the cow herd with respect to reducing hay waste and limit feeding. Contact your county extension office for questions relating to drought management or other issues.