Effect of Drought

Beef Cattle Face Forage Poor Winter

Cattle producers in many areas of the country stricken by last summer's drought must contend with reduced forage supplies through the winter, according to livestock specialists. The winter forage situation is even more critical, say these livestock specialists, in areas where the drought continued unabated through the fall.

Southeastern Colorado is one region where autumn rains didn't break the drought, says Bob Clark, Pueblo County extension agent. "As a result, for all practical purposes cattle producers are out of pasture." Clark adds that after five months of grazing upon drought-ravaged pastures, many brood cows in that part of Colorado are in thin condition as they enter winter.

Many beef cows are also in thinner than normal condition in Arkansas, says George Davis, livestock specialist with the cooperative extension service there, even though autumn rains did prove somewhat beneficial to pastures. However, winter feed supplies are so short, Davis adds, that many cattlemen have resorted to baling rice straw and milo stover to provide roughage for their beef cows.

But these feed sources lack nutritional quality, Davis points out, and cattlemen who feed such crop residues to their brood cows will have to provide supplements as well to maintain good body condition.

Thin beef cows and reduced winter forage supplies can be found in many other regions of the country where last summer's drought left its mark.

In southern Georgia, many beef cows are also thinner than normal as they go into winter after several months of grazing upon sparse pastures, says Curly Cook, extension beef specialist with the University of Georgia. Pastures in the northern half of the state responded well after rainfall this autumn, Cook explains, but in south Georgia, many farmers have had trouble establishing pastures for winter grazing due to the lack of fall precipitation.

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Lack of precipitation wasn't the problem in west central Texas where the drought was broken by substantial autumn rainfall, says Ed Huston, animal nutritionist with the Texas A&M research station in San Angelo. But, Huston notes, the rain came too late in the growing season to stimulate much regrowth of warm season grasses.

"Areas that rely on grasses that are normally dormant by mid-autumn will not realize as much benefit from the fall rain until spring," Huston explains. "Generally, native grass rangeland pastures are a mixture of both kinds of seasonal grasses, but some have more winter growing plants than others. Those that do are lucky this year."

Huston points out that cattle producers who don't have the benefit of grasses that grow in the winter will have to rely more on supplements for their brood cows. Much of the calving in the San Angelo region occurs in January and February, says Huston, and beef cows in thin condition at calving will have a harder time going into the breeding cycle next spring.

To keep a beef cow in good condition, and to prepare them for rebreeding, Huston advises operators not to let their beef cows go through an extended period undernourished.

However, much of the forage available in drought-stricken areas is not providing enough nutrients to meet beef cow requirements, especially replacement heifers, says Clark. And, because of the inadequate supply of available forage, he also says many cattlemen will need to provide higher levels of supplements per animal just to get brood cows to maintain condition.

But selecting the supplement that will meet the specific requirements of a beef cow has traditionally been a difficult task, says Neal Ward, Ralston Purina Co. cattle specialist.

"Many cattlemen choose supplements based solely on their protein content," Ward explains. "This can lead to giving cows either more protein than is needed, or not enough because the selection is based on guesswork."

However, a new concept in supplement selection called the Forage Balancer Brood Cow Feeding System, significantly simplifies the problem, Ward says. This new brood cow feeding system, he adds, enables cow-calf operators to make the most efficient use of their available hay and pasture while maintaining their cows in top condition.

"Forage balancers represent the first line of supplements that allows a producer to confidently choose—based on what he knows about his hay and pasture—the product which precisely balances the nutritional deficiencies in his forage," Ward says.

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To select a specific supplement, Ward says cattle producers need only identify the quality of their forage within three general categories: good, including small-grains pastures and legume hays; fair, such as native and improved grass hays; or poor, consisting mainly of crop residues and any grasses in a dormant stage of growth. Ward explains that each of these three forage types was defined by Purina researchers, based on the nutrients available in each type. "The difference among forages is not great enough to warrant any more than three categories," Ward adds.

To balance this forage, Ward says, the Forage Balancer System offers a specific choice of supplements in various forms—blocks, cubes, meals and liquids—preferred by individual cattlemen to fit their management programs.

"Each of the products within the line is formulated to provide a nutritional balance when fed at the recommended rates," Ward says. "As a result, the cattle producer avoids either overfeeding or underfeeding nutrients at a critical time of the year." He concludes that consequently it prevents them from making costly mistakes, while also assuring them their brood cows will maintain peak performance condition.

Further information on supplement selection is available from local Purina dealers, or by writing Imogene Farthing, Cattle Chow Products, Ralston Purina, Checkerboard Square, St. Louis, Mo. 63188. AJ