COPING WITH DROUGHT: CALF MANAGEMENT

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Many Northeast Oklahoma cattlemen will soon need to make important decisions as a result of continued dry conditions. For spring calving herds, this is an especially critical time of the year with young calves and cows that are at the peak of their nutritional needs.

Early weaning spring-born calves will permit high conception rates and rapid rebreeding. They are big and old enough at forty-five days of age to be managed in a feeding program which will better utilize feed dollars. The forage these calves do not eat is now available for the cowherd and individual cows will consume 15-20% less forage if they are no longer lactating. With proper management, calf gains will approach two pounds per head daily with efficient feed conversions (approximately 4-5 pounds feed per pound of gain) and few health problems.

An early-weaning ration will contain about 30% cottonseed hulls and 50% corn. The remaining 20% will be made up of protein, mineral and vitamin supplements, and a coccidiostat. The ration should be 15% crude protein and 65-70% TDN. Producers may obtain more specifics from OSU Extension fact sheet F-3264 (Early Weaning for the Beef Herd).

Creep feeding calves will reduce forage intake by the calves but will have no effect on forage intake of the cows. The preferred component of the calf’s diet is milk. Creep feed will substitute for forage, not milk. The overall effect of creep feeding in solving the problem of a forage shortage will be small.

Fall calving herds facing severe forage shortages may consider weaning calves immediately. Weaned calves could be sold or ownership retained in drylot conditions on the ranch or sent to a feedlot.

Although early-weaning is certainly not recommended as standard practice, it can provide an alternative in certain situations such as drought, when large amounts of purchased forage would be necessary to maintain a cow herd through to normal weaning time or when cows are already too thin to rebreed. Early-weaned calves can be efficiently raised to a normal weaning weight with minimal labor and facilities.