

Weather Difficult For Arkansas Cattle Producers

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

The ups and downs of late winter and spring-like weather have made things difficult for Arkansas beef cattle producers.

"The weather the last month or two has been unpredictable," said Dr. Tom Troxel, professor/associate animal science department head for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service. "In any given week, many parts of the state have experienced daytime highs in the upper 60s with bright sunshiny days followed by a drop in temperatures to the 40s with a cold rain or snow."

This becomes a problem for producers because March is when many cattle producers are reaching the end of their hay supplies. Many times, producers will feed their best quality hay during the colder months of the winter to maintain their cows' body condition. However, much of the hay remaining in barns is of lesser quality, Troxel said.

This can become a problem for about 75 percent of the nearly one million beef cows in Arkansas that calve between January and April. A cow's nutrient requirements increase at this time, but unfortunately for producers, they're either out of hay at this time or have lower quality hay left, Troxel said.

Cattle performance can be negatively affected because of the ups and downs of the recent Arkansas weather. Add to that the high cost of hay and feed, and producers face economic losses.

Troxel said cold weather stimulates cows' appetites by 3 percent to 8 percent because they want to eat more to stay warm. If producers

don't adjust their herd's feeding program to meet their extra needs, the animals will mobilize their fat reserves.

"Since most of our cows calve this time of year, now is not the time you want them to lose body condition," he said. "Cows in poor body condition produce less milk than normal, and it takes them longer to rebreed for next year's calf crop.

"In essence, it affects production for two years. Because cows will breed later in 2008, their 2009 calves will have lower weaning weights," Troxel said.

Extreme weather swings can severely stress cows and their calves. Cows and calves can absorb radiation from the sun in the daytime, and they'll get can along fine on a sunny day, even if it's below freezing. The problem is when the sky is cloudy with cold, wet and windy conditions. Rain is worse than snow.

In this weather pattern, newborn calves can get chilled and die, Troxel noted.

If calves are chilled, he said, move them out of the weather. Often, a calf can be warmed by rubbing the animals down with a towel, which stimulates circulation. Producers may have to use a heat lamp to help animals recover.

It's critical in this period that calves have access to colostrum to strengthen their immune systems, according to Troxel.

Colostrum, the first milk a calf gets from its mother, is full of antibodies, which help keep a calf healthy. Research suggests good quality colostrum helps keep a calf healthy throughout its lifetime. If necessary, producers must provide an artificial source of colostrum. Δ