

Winter Means Cattle Producers Need To Keep Closer Eye On Herds

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

Cold and wet conditions will compound dangers to cattle, and producers need to keep a closer eye on herds through the time spring grass can be grazed, said Tom Troxel, professor and associate department head-animal science for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

Drought-shortened hay and grazing mean some of the state's cattle are going into the winter thinner than normal.

"It's hard enough with cold weather, but with wet weather on top of that, cattle will get chilled and the winter will be especially hard on cattle that are already thin," Troxel said Wednesday.

With months of severe drought covering Texas, Oklahoma and other states, "hay was in such demand and prices increased, making hay an extremely expensive commodity," he said. "Unfortunately, poor-quality hay was baled, sold and shipped to Arkansas."

All of which made things exponentially more difficult for beef producers. Troxel said many cattle producers have

been feeding hay since last August or September, when hay would usually be started closer to November.

"Oftentimes producers had to feed purchased hay that wasn't the high quality they are used to producing themselves," he said. "Because of the poor-quality hay, cattle have been on an energy deficiency diet for a long time."

Because of the energy deficiency diet, cattle have used their fat reserves to maintain their body function, thus reducing body condition. This condition becomes very critical as the cattle production cycle moves into the calving period.

Calving increases the nutritional demand on the cow's system. For example, as a cow calves and begins to lactate, her energy requirements increase by 36 percent; her protein requirements increase by 62 percent and dry matter requirements increase by 17 percent. As the weather becomes colder and wetter, this also adds nutritional demands on the cow's system.

"All of these conditions could add up to the cow producing less colostrum and less concentrated

colostrums," Troxel said. Colostrum is the first milk that protects the newborn calf from diseases. If the newborn calf isn't well protected, scours – or diarrhea – may become a real problem this year.

"Cows in poor body condition produce less milk compared to cows in moderate body condition," he said. "This will affect the weaning weights of the 2012 calf crop. In addition, cows in poor body condition take longer to re-breed, which will affect the 2013 calf crop. If the condition is bad enough, cows die."

Forage testing is critical to ensure the health of beef cattle through the winter and healthier calves come springtime. "The key is quality and quantity ration," he said. "The first step is to obtain a forage test to determine the hay quality."

"Once the protein and energy values of the hay are known, the proper supplement can be determined to balance the diet," Troxel said. Cattle producers can contact their county extension agent for more information on how to conduct a forage test. Δ



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