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DROUGHT
GUIDE
REVISED 1992

Cattle Management During Drought

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Cattlemen have always been dependent upon the weather for their livelihood. During drought most producers are looking at a few management alternatives that are available to them.

Early weaning of calves is one option in drought situations that may enable the producer to reduce losses or avoid making forced sales of good breeding stock, which otherwise would have to be sold in a low-priced market. The early weaning program will depend upon the condition of the cow and the age of the calf.

Early weaning will permit more cows to be carried per acre of pasture, therefore, reducing the number of cows which may have otherwise have to had been sold. In most cases, early weaning will involve calves having to be fed in the dry lot and fed, therefore increasing the feed and overhead costs which one would not have incurred on later weaned calves.

With proper feeding management, however, early weaned calves can grow as rapidly as they would have while in the nursing stage and in many cases will grow faster if the drought is very severe.

One would expect that returns would not be increased by early weaning, thus this system would only be used during times of short feed supplies and drought conditions. Calves which are weaned early should probably be classified into age groups and managed differently, depending upon their age. A classification which might be adequate would be under six weeks, six weeks to three months, three to six months, and six months and older. Calves under six weeks

should probably not be weaned unless absolutely necessary, since they need mother's milk and the cost of supplying this by artificial means is costly and risky to the life of the calf. Calves three to six months can be fed good quality hay and grain. Calves over six months will require no special treatment other than the proper care and feeding.

When early weaning calves, they should be started on feed about three weeks prior to weaning to insure that calves are eating before weaning.

Calves which are weaned from three to six months of age should be fed rations containing at least 12 to 14 percent protein. It may also be useful to add enough molasses to insure that the calves are eating at least three percent of their body weight per day.

Older calves, over six months of age, should be fed good quality hay and a small amount of grain. Two to four pounds of grain per day should insure that they are growing at a normal growth rate equivalent to what they would be if they were still nursing. The use of straws in growing calves has not been very successful because of the small amount of energy it contains in relationship to the amount of bulk. It is also poor in palatability. If it is necessary that some straw be used in a calf ration, it should be only a small percentage of the ration.

During drought there may be little or no green feed or carotene, which is converted to vitamin A for calves or cows. Even though cattle can store vitamin A in their liver and fat from

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four to six months, it may be necessary to supplement vitamin A either in the ration or through vitamin A and D injections during the drought.

Research has shown that with proper management and feeding early weaning of calves can result in calves equal in weight to calves raised on their dam. An Oklahoma study found that calves reared in dry lot weaned at about the same weight as calves raised on dams. They also found that early weaning improved heifer conception rates from 59 percent to 97 percent. The heifers with the early weaned calves gained more in the fall than heifers that had suckled their calves. Another study done in Kansas evaluated calves weaned at 50 days of age, with herd mates receiving creep feed or just allowed to nurse their dams in the dry lot without creep. The early weaned calves gained more than either the creep fed calves or the non-creep fed calves

during a trial period of 107 days.

During drought, creep feeding is an alternative that some producers may wish to consider to insure heavier calves at weaning. Under normal conditions creep feeding often has been a marginal management practice due to poor conversion rates of creep feed to increased weaning weights. Little net profit has accrued to individuals using this practice. However, under drought conditions with poor milking cows, gains may be less and creep feeding more effective. It has been more effective when cows are milking poorly because of poor range or because cows are young and not producing as much milk. Under most conditions grain can be used as a creep feed since milk will serve to keep protein up to the level needed.