



# BEEF CATTLE TIME

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Winter 2008

## Practices to Help Pastures Damaged by the 2007 Drought

*Dr. Gary Bates, Forage Agronomist  
Plant Sciences*

Even though it is winter, there are several things you can do over the next few months to improve your pasture and hay production in April and May. January and February are key months for pasture management. Below are a few practices to focus on during the next few weeks.

**1. Take a soil sample to determine fertilizer and lime requirements.** Get a soil sample submitted soon. You will get your results back in plenty of time to know exactly the amount of fertilizer and lime that needs to be applied to your fields. Getting lime applied and proper nutrients available in pastures and hayfields is important when trying to get clovers established, and making forage plants as competitive as possible. Submitting your sample now will help you beat the rush of samples that will be submitted in February and March.

**2. Scout fields to determine the proper herbicide treatment for weedy fields.** Many pastures and hayfields will have heavier weed pressure than normal, mostly due to last year's drought, overgrazing and stand loss. Inspect these fields to determine what type of weeds are present and the level of weed pressure. Ask your Extension agent for help in identifying problem weeds and determining the proper herbicide and rate to apply. Most cool-season weeds can be controlled effectively with the herbicides that are currently available. Remember that you will need about three days in which the high temperature reaches 60 F prior to spraying.

**3. Plant red and white clover in February.** It won't be long before clover seeding time will be here. Late February is the recommended time to broadcast clover seed over a tall fescue pasture or hayfield. If any of these fields currently have more than 2 inches of

stubble, make sure to get these fields grazed down prior to seeding. Seed two pounds of white clover and four pounds of red clover per acre. Be sure to eliminate any nitrogen from your fertilizer if you are going to seed clover. The nitrogen will stimulate the grass to grow too fast, making it difficult for the clover seedlings to get adequate sunlight.

It is important to consider any herbicide applications made prior to seeding the clover. You need to wait four weeks after applying 2,4-D to plant clovers. Some of the newer herbicides have a significantly longer waiting period. Be sure to read the labels and talk to your Extension agent to determine the proper methods to seed clovers following herbicide applications.

These are just a few important recommendations that can dramatically affect the production, quality and profitability of your forage operation. Even though pastures are not growing much right now, there is still a lot to do to ensure a successful season.

## Manage Feed for Best Result

*Dr. Roy Burriss, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist  
Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky*

*The following article is composed of comments from Dr. Roy Burriss, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Kentucky. His comments are appropriate for Tennessee conditions.*

Tight feed supplies mean cattle producers will need to be careful managers this winter to keep their animals in good condition to ensure healthy calves and rebreeding in the spring.

"I have some real concern for our cattle producers in that late winter is probably going to be an ugly time for us," explained Burriss. "It's probably going to cost us 50 percent more to winter cattle this year than it normally does."

If producers do not meet the nutritional needs of their cows, it will not only affect the 2008 calf crop but

also the 2009 crop, because many of the cows in poor condition will not rebreed. Cattle with body condition scores of five have rebreeding rates in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, while those with scores of three to four are only in the 51<sup>st</sup> to 76<sup>th</sup> percentile.

“This could have a far-reaching effect, if producers don’t take proper care of their cattle. A lot of them will take good care of their herds, but some of them won’t,” Burris added.

Burris is cautioning producers about the high price and low quality of some hay being offered on the market, including hay from ground enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and baled cornstalks. These will provide little nutritional value for cattle and will result in cattle losing weight, having weak calves and reducing their chances of rebreeding.

“I’m scared to death some producers are going to depend on this poor-quality hay, and it’s going to mean problems in the calving season.”

There’s nothing wrong with buying good hay, Burris said, but buying poor hay at high prices only adds to producers’ expenses without improving their feed supply. Cattle won’t compensate for poor-quality hay by eating more of it; they will eat less. In order to keep the cattle in good condition on poor hay, it will mean both supplementing with other feed ingredients and supplementing a lot.

“Cattle don’t have a hay requirement; they have a nutrient requirement,” he said. So, a key factor for farmers is to test the hay to know its quality and then feed a balanced ration.

Not all hay in the state is poor quality. Cattle will consume good-quality hay and won’t need as much supplementation, but the state’s hay crop was reduced substantially because of a spring freeze followed by drought. Producers need to decide which supplements they need, and in which amounts, to stretch their hay supply through the winter.

## **Evaluate Cows and Feed Supplies Now**

*Clyde Lane, Jr., Professor  
Animal Science*

Now is the time to evaluate the animals in the herd to determine if the feed supply will be adequate. The animals have survived an unusually dry summer and fall. Plans have been made and feeding has been started in many operations.

It is important to “step back” and evaluate how animals are performing. Are the animals in the desired body condition? With the many different feed ingredients being used, you need to know if the mixture of feeds is getting the job done. Are cows losing, maintaining or gaining weight? In short, are the feeds doing what they are supposed to be doing? If not, then it is time to make ration adjustments that will result in animals remaining at the desired body condition.

You also need to evaluate the feed supply. Many producers started into the winter season with a short supply of hay. Additional feed ingredients have been secured to help stretch the hay supply. After making adjustment to make the feeding program work, it is time to determine if there will be enough of the various feed ingredients to last until spring. If feeding has started, it should be relatively easy to determine if feed supplies will be adequate. By evaluating the feed supply now, there is time to secure additional feed ingredients before the supplies get tighter and more expensive during the hardest part of the winter.

## **Match the Bull to the “New Herd”**

*Clyde Lane, Jr., Professor  
Animal Science*

Do you realize that you have a “new herd” of cows on your farm? With the culling of animals last fall to get the animal numbers in line with the feed supply, the make-up of the herd has changed considerably.

In most cases, the herd is now made up of animals with an average genetic potential that is superior to that before the culling. The lower-quality and lower-producing animals are gone. It may even be that there are no replacement heifers in the herd this year. In this situation, it is time to decide if the bull that is currently being used should be kept.

If a bull with exceptional calving ease is to be used, and there are no heifers, it might be desirable to replace him with a bull that has more growth potential with less concern for calving ease. This would also be a good time to secure that better bull to get an extra jump on quality and performance in the herd since a higher percentage of superior cows are in the herd.

Be sure that the bull being used will be producing the kind of heifers that can be kept as replacements since herd size will need to be built back to normal levels. Be sure to utilize EPDs (Expected Progeny Differences) to help select the new herd sire. Take advantage of the current situation to make improvements in the herd.

## **Plan for the 2008 Hay Crop**

*Clyde Lane, Jr., Professor  
Animal Science*

Most producers will be entering the spring of 2008 with no reserve hay supplies. Plans need to be made to produce, harvest and store the best hay possible. The first step will be to replace the clovers lost last summer during the drought. Plant scientists recommend adding clover to pastures during February. With the somewhat thinner stands of grass, it should be easy to spread seed and get good soil contact. Just remember that the addition of clover will improve the quality of the hay produced and reduce the need to purchase additional protein for the cattle next winter.

This would be a good year to divide pastures into smaller units. It can be done relatively inexpensively using an electric fence and is much cheaper than permanent fencing. By having more pasture units available, cattle can be forced to use all the forage in a given area while other pastures can be allowed to grow and be harvested as hay. The idea is to produce as much hay as possible this year to build up the reserves used this past summer, fall and winter.

Plan ahead so that hay can be harvested at the proper stage. Waiting until the grasses have produced seed heads is too late to achieve optimum quality. Be prepared to cut grass hay at the late-boot stage. Get equipment ready early so that hay can be cut when the break in the spring weather comes.

It is also the time to make plans for storing the hay harvested in the spring. Consider constructing hay-storage facilities so hay can be stored inside and storage losses can be minimized. If a hay-storage facility cannot be constructed, plan to store the hay on gravel, pallets, tires or other devices to keep hay off the ground. Cover the hay if possible.

The spring of 2008 is the time to make plans for producing more and higher-quality hay for the beef herd. Contact your local UT Extension office for assistance.

## **Marketing Challenges and Opportunities in 2008**

*Emmit L. Rawls, Professor  
Agricultural Economics*

Last year was very challenging from many angles, but especially feed and forage production and its impact on management and marketing decisions. The impact of the 2007 experience will be lasting for many in the beef business. Some who liquidated will not be back due to operator age and higher land values as well as other issues.

While producers have been encouraged to precondition, higher feed costs have made it less attractive for many. Due to higher feedlot cost of gain, buyers are preferring heavier feeders. The price spread between lightweight and heavier cattle has narrowed to about one half that of a year ago. This favors those who buy stocker calves to background, as well as those cow-calf producers who retain ownership either for 45-day preconditioning or for a longer period.

Auction receipts have continued large into December as hay supplies are used up and some choose not to buy more. Cow slaughter has increased this fall after declining nationally by 8 percent in the third quarter. In region 4, which includes Tennessee and other Southeastern states, cow slaughter is up 21 percent over 2006 year-to-date. In contrast, region 6, which includes Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana and New Mexico, cow slaughter has been down 14 percent compared

to 2006. Those states were devastated by drought last year, causing increased cow slaughter.

We have shipped many cows and replacement heifers to some of those states, as they have had very plentiful moisture. We can be very grateful for moisture in those states and for record high fed-cattle prices averaging near \$93 per hundred, which have supported feeder cattle prices this year. The decline in prices in the fall of 2007 was due principally to a 75-cent rise in corn prices and some decline in fed-cattle futures for 2008. For every 25 cent per bushel increase in the price of corn, prices for 550-pound feeders must come down \$2.50. That alone accounts for a \$7.50 per hundred decline in those prices this fall.

The cattle cycle is likely to pause significantly. Between the huge liquidation in the Southern Plains in 2006 and in the Southeast in 2007, the January 1 inventory is likely to decline at least 1 percent on a national basis. In Tennessee, I expect the beef cow inventory to decline at least 5 percent from January 2007. On a national level, this cycle began in 2004, had two years of higher total cattle numbers, a negligible increase in 2006 and now is expected to decline in the January 1 head count. Even though the profit opportunity is present, herd reductions due to the drought will cause this cycle to stop or pause before herds begin to increase. For those with adequate feed resources, this is positive.

A smaller cow herd will mean smaller beef supplies, which leads to higher prices. We have had good demand for bred replacement heifers this fall, even though many have been sold outside Tennessee. That demand should continue for the next few years as producers in the Southern Plains and Southeast begin to rebuild herds.

The country of origin label (COOL) law is set to take effect in September 2008. Congress is attempting to pass legislation to make the record keeping process less difficult. For several reasons cow calf producers need to keep records of birth dates and identification numbers of calves being born. It will provide a record if needed for COOL.

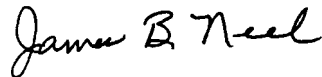
It will also provide the needed information to allow one to market calves through Process Verified Program (PVP) for age and source sales. We have many opportunities to market preconditioned calves that are age- and source-verified. Yes, it does take some extra effort, but buyers are demanding such calves. Packers are paying premiums of \$25 to \$30 per head for age- and source-verified calves. Feedlots do not necessarily bid all of that into what they pay for our feeder cattle, but when coupled with a good preconditioning program, buyers are paying prices easily exceeding weekly auction prices.

Numbers are a key to marketing for load-lot prices. Regardless of the program, if there is less than a load of calves, it is very difficult to fetch much premium. With the Ag Enhancement Funds providing assistance on handling facilities, weaning pens, the \$10 per head for

being age- and source-verified and marketing through a preconditioned sale, there has never been anything close to this much support for feeder cattle marketing in the state.

I expect Tennessee cow-calf producers to wait to see how next year's hay crop develops before making any significant changes in herd size. Those who had forced

sales due to drought need to check with their tax preparer regarding special tax considerations for those sales and purchase of replacement cattle. Higher fertilizer and feed costs will not make 2008 an easy year. Good management of calves can make them a much more valuable commodity and perhaps offset some of the higher cost of maintaining the cow herd.



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## Beef Cattle Time

From:

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Leader/Agent

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