Proceed with Caution and a Management Plan on the Ranch This Winter

By Manny Encinias

Traveling across the state the last couple of weeks it is apparent that managing the cowherd this winter will present numerous challenges to NM operators. It is wise to proceed cautiously and have a management plan thoroughly outlined to guide you through this winter and next spring. In this month’s newsletter I would like to identify some topics that have crossed my desk recently as producers are making plans to manage the cowherd through the winter in New Mexico.

Hold on to the cowherd for all the right reasons. Keep everything in perspective and don’t lose sight of the larger ranch goals. Don’t sacrifice future grass production, cow productivity, and opportunity to capture market value by overgrazing your pastures. Estimate how many grazing head days the ranch has left and off of these estimates start developing a plan to determine if cow numbers need to be reduced on the grazing resource. The first cattle to go, in an effort to balance cow numbers with forage availability, are the females that are beyond their production prime (i.e. weaning lighter calves) or are not pregnant. Which also means that every cow on the place should be preg-checked this fall. If it is difficult to find a veterinarian or technician consider the commercially available yes or no BIOPryn (www.biotracking.com) blood tests. These test are available through many semen distributors throughout the country, and are a cost-effective pregnancy diagnosis tool when just a simple pregnant (yes) or open (no) diagnosis is warranted.

Understand all of the conditions of lease pasture arrangements. According to recent reports, more than 24,000 NM beef cows have been shipped out of state to graze in 2011. A significant proportion of these cows were placed on ranches in states north of New Mexico and to lesser extent to states east of the Mississippi River. Even today there is lease pasture available in the central and northern plains, but before diving into a deal fully understand all the costs, terms of the lease, and the likely production implications of moving a cowherd to a different production environment. Are cattle in adequate body condition to survive a winter season that may last up to six months? Does the lease arrangement include hay, care, calving assistance, or identify a minimum calf survival rate? Visit the ranch, check references, and have a clear written contract. Don’t forget to contact the office of the state veterinarian in the receiving state to ensure that cowherd will meet all importation health requirements. Contact or go the New Mexico Livestock Board website (www.nmlbonline.com) for a listing of each states import rules and the health requirements to get the cowherd back home.

Define nutrient requirements for cowherd to adjust supplementation program. A common obstacle producer’s encounter is defining a starting point and the methods to make adjustments to a winter supplementation program. To develop a sound supplementation program look up the nutrient requirements based on age, weight and production status of the cowherd and identify intake requirements as well as energy and protein concentrations of a cows diet. Secondly, gather a representative sample of
grass and hay and have each laboratory analyzed for nutritional composition at least once every three months during the winter, dormant season. Private, commercial labs, like SDK Laboratories (www.sdklabs.com) and Servi-Tech Laboratories (www.servitechlabs.com), are common labs used by producers to have grass and hay samples analyzed in a timely fashion. After the primary roughage source is analyzed, determine the first limiting nutrient (FLN) of your winter-feeding program. In most non-drought years, protein is typically the FLN and as a result typically supplemented. However, the drought changes everything and in several cases where the grass is short, energy may be limiting. Protein and energy concentrations of grass and hay exposed to the winter elements will typically decrease as the winter progresses. Also, expect variability in nutrient concentrations of hay and commodity-based feedstuffs. Have new loads sampled and analyzed to keep a winter-feeding program in balance.

**Pencil out a dry lot, feeding program on the home place or at a commercial feedyard.** Since very few regions of the state grew any grass this year most operations will be pushing the limit to hold the cowherd together. A dry lot wintering scenario is not as uncommon as one might expect this year. However, if feedstuffs have not already been purchased, penning cattle and feeding them on the home place may prove to be quite costly because of the shortage of locally available roughage sources. Helpful web resources commonly recommended to producers to source hay and commodity-based energy and protein feedstuffs are the Internet Hay Exchange (www.hayexchange.com) and By-Product Feed Price Listing (agebb.missouri.edu/dairy/byprod/bplist.asp), respectively. Beware of cheap hay deals and ask for a nutrient analysis that includes a nitrate test. Especially in the drought region, acres of abandoned or low yielding grain crops were or are now being put up as hay. It has been noted in some situations that the nitrate concentrations of some of this hay alone exceeds the maximum tolerable limits for beef cows.

Another option for producers is to send the cowherd to a commercial feeding facility. Numerous grower and finishing yards throughout NM and west TX are wintering more bred females this year than normal. While it can be amongst the most feasible options to hold onto cows and keep them close to home, sending cattle to a commercial feeding facility is a short-term, solution. While a typical commercial feeding facility is a turnkey operation that provides feed, labor, and services to its customers, most are not set up to be a maternity ward. Plan to remove cattle before the calving season begins. Even on the ranch newborn calves are more susceptible to scours and respiratory disease when calved in a confined, pen setting compared to out in the pasture. Consulting with a veterinarian on a herd health program, modified for a wintering program in a confined setting is highly recommended.

**Test water supply for quality.** Do not overlook the need to routinely sample and analyze the drinking water supplies for cattle. Even in non-drought years water quality is essential to a complete and balanced nutrition program. Poor water quality, defined by high concentrations of total dissolved solids and/or salts negatively impacts cattle performance by reducing water, forage, and mineral intake. Not to mention the possibility of inducing a toxic state resulting in death. Numerous wrecks were reported throughout the summer and have continued into the fall where cattle died as a result of toxic concentrations of solids and salts in the water alone or in combination with feedstuffs that had higher concentrations of sulfur and nitrates. Especially in situations where different hay and feedstuffs are being used to feed cows this winter, testing the quality of the water is warranted.

On the nutrition side of things I feel these are amongst the most common topics being discussed, considered, and contemplated this fall by the cow-calf operators I am fortunate to work with. I hope you find it useful and as always feel free to call me to discuss these and any other questions you may have in more detail.

Make plans to attend the **Cattleman’s College on Thursday, December 1st in Albuquerque.** Find the program details in this newsletter. Also mark **January 17th and 18th on your calendar as the Southwest**
Beef Symposium will be held in Roswell, NM. Check the program website for the Southwest Beef Symposium (swbs.nmsu.edu) on December 1st for program details, online registration, and host hotel information.

Pasture Rangeland forage (PRF) Pilot Insurance Update

By Nick Ashcroft, Les Owen and Sam Smallidge

Not much has changed since last writing about the Pasture Rangeland Forage (PRF) pilot insurance program. PRF program in New Mexico will remain unchanged for the 2012 crop year. In October 2011, NMDA and RITF met with the Risk Management Agency (RMA) and government contractors to discuss specific methods and technical details of the vegetation index (VI) as used in New Mexico and the rainfall index (RI), so we might fully understand and inform the industry of the program. We are currently analyzing RMA’s VI assessment protocols and indices calculations. We will conduct similar analyses regarding the RI.

New Mexico’s loss ratio (indemnity/premium) is 2.13. However, New Mexico’s indemnity/liability ratio ($3,703,034/$9,953,521) is 0.372. The Texas loss ratio of 1.96 is less but the indemnity/liability ratio ($132,209,971/$292,238,897) is 0.452. This indicates that policies in Texas paid a greater portion of liability than in New Mexico. This may be a function of specific weather patterns this year and use of different claims assessment tools (RI used in TX, VI used in NM). Also, this relationship might change by the end of 2011. The VI did not approach a loss ratio of 1 until the May-July interval, whereas the RI has been above 1 the entire year. This may partially be explained by selection of intervals for VI policies outside the growing season by producers who were not fully informed or were willing to gamble.

Here is some information to consider when thinking about insuring with PRF. The terms “greenness” and “normal” are not what you think. “Greenness” refers to the difference in reflectance values observed by two satellite sensors, not forage condition. Normal refers to the average relationship between interval index values and the long term median interval index values, not a simple average of observed values.

Research indicates that Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI)-based indices, such as the VI, are best suited for the growing season when plant photosynthesis is active. Over the long-term, NDVI values outside of the growing season are very low, have little variability from year-to-year, and therefore would require more unusual conditions for the VI to trigger a payment. It is important to consider the previous growing season if you wish to insure prior to the insured year’s growing season, as last year’s stand of vegetation has a reflectance value that will influence your final grid index.

Croplands may confound the NDVI readings if the acreage in a grid is high enough. Unfortunately, it is unknown how many acres of cropland are required to upset final grid indices. Also, tree and shrub cover reduce the ability of NDVI based indices to detect changes in herbaceous forage. A high percent cover of woody vegetation within a grid may reduce the likelihood of receiving a payment. We do not know the threshold for the amount of canopy cover at which the VI is significantly affected. Spring emergence of cool season plants (spring green-up) seems to confound the VI. Selecting intervals during this time frame may create more uncertainty about conditions under which payments may be received. Please don’t hesitate to contact us with any questions or comments.
Upcoming Events

2011 NM Joint Stockman’s Convention – Thursday, December 1, 2011
Cattleman’s College Program – Sponsored by Pfizer Animal Health and Genetics

9:00-9:15 am -  Introductions

9:15-10:15 am -  New Technologies / Feeding the World
                   Dr. Gary Sides, Beef and Feedlot Nutritionist, Pfizer Animal Health

10:30-11:15 am - DNA Testing; Increasing Your Bottom Line
                   Dr. Milton Thomas, Gerald Thomas Endowed Chair, NMSU Las Cruces

11:15-12:00 pm - Third Party Verified Marketing Programs
                   LeAnn Saunders, President, IMI Global, Inc., Castle Rock, CO

12:00-12:45 pm - LUNCH

12:45-1:30 pm -  Weather Outlook
                   Dr. Dave DuBois, State Climatologist, NMSU Las Cruces

1:30-2:15 pm -   Impact of the Drought on the NM Cowherd Inventory
                   Dr. Manny Encinias, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist, NMSU, Clayton

2:15-2:30 pm -   BREAK

2:30-3:15 pm -   The Cattle Market: Inside and Out of the Drought Region
                   Dr. Paul Gutierrez, Extension Economist, NMSU Las Cruces

3:15-4:00 pm -   Evaluating Risk Management Options for the Ranch
                   Dr. Nick Ashcroft, Extension Range Specialist, NMSU Las Cruces

Southwest Beef Symposium
January 17 – 18, 2011 – Roswell, NM
Further details in program website available on December 1st

Happy & Blessed Thanksgiving – Nov. 24th

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