

Drought puts damper on healthy cows, calves

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 17 May 2013 13:51 -



Cold temps, snow and rain create challenging conditions.

During the 2012 calving season, babies and their mothers basked in plentiful sunshine and munched on lush, nutritious grass.

Pastures, buoyed by plentiful rain the prior year, were in good shape.

But as spring stretched into summer, little to no precipitation dried up pastures and producers culled their herds earlier than usual.

As breeding of cows and heifers began in June, the animals were already stressed, according to Dr. Melissa Dykshorn, a veterinarian at Eastside Animal Center.

And, in October, fierce winds flattened many cornstalks in the area and put more corn on the ground than normal.

When cattle grazed those fields, Dykshorn said the animals were exposed to a lot of corn all of a sudden.

“It was hard on their digestive systems at first,” she said. “And it added another stress.”

January and February, when calving typically begins, brought consistent cold temperatures.

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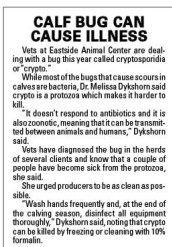
Dykshorn said March and April were anything but consistent, bringing snow, wind and rain and a few warm days sprinkled in between.

“Calves do better with consistency,” she said.

As a result of erratic weather and temperatures, Dykshorn said ranchers dealt with more scours (diarrhea) because of bacteria in the soil.

“Bacteria is already there but it grows better in wetter weather,” she explained.

Because cows and heifers were already stressed, Dykshorn said their milk wasn't as nutrient rich.



Bacteria, less nutritious milk and adverse weather conditions meant more respiratory infections (including pneumonia) for more calves, she said.

“We treated a lot more sick calves this year,” Dykshorn said.

Calves with scours become dehydrated, she said, noting that producers brought them into the clinic where they were placed in special pens and hydrated and given antibiotics intravenously.

Sometimes the sick calves remained at the clinic for up to four days.

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At one time, Dykshorn said vets were treating 13 sick calves at one time and built special temporary pens on the side of the building, covering them with plastic to keep the animals dry.

“It was like triage,” she said.

Other than scours and respiratory diseases, Dykshorn said vets didn’t experience any more dystocia (difficult birth) than normal. The condition often means that calves have to be manually pulled from their mothers.

Calving season is almost over in the area and Dykshorn predicts early weaning as many pastures haven’t recovered from the drought.

“Producers want to make sure moms get enough grass and they won’t keep their condition with babies still nursing,” she said.

Some calves will be taken to feedlots to gain weight before they’re sold while others will be auctioned at three to four months old.

Next year’s calving season could be interesting, Dykshorn said.

“Moms are coming off a less-than-ideal year and because we’re short on grass, they might start off thinner,” she said.

If the summer turns hot early, cows and heifers will be harder to breed because they’ll be stressed, Dykshorn explained.

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“But we’re at the mercy of the environment so we have to take it as it comes,” she said.

She added that technology has helped cattle producers become more successful.

For example, Dykshorn said meteorology has improved so weather patterns are more predictable and cattle can be moved more quickly before an impending storm.

Genetics are also helping to produce more hardy cattle that can withstand harsher temperatures.

“We’ve made advances but you can’t protect cattle from everything,” Dykshorn said. “We can’t eliminate all potential dangers and, in the end, the cow has to eat grass in the pasture.”

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