

## To Keep or to Sell Calves in the Drought?

During drought there is very little grass in pastures either for animals to eat or to cut as hay. Many are already feeding surplus hay from last winter and some of you are already buying hay and other feeds for your livestock. The question many of you are trying to answer is, "Do I keep feeding or do I sell my calves now?" It's a tough question to answer generally because each operation is different.

- If you have adequate feedstuffs to hold onto your calves until fall, you need to do so. Prices are expected to go up because of a smaller calf crop this year and secondly, improved demand for beef may also help market prices.
- Look for alternative feeds that are readily available and low-cost. Producers have got to consider using other feedstuffs than just hay. Options could include broiler litter, whole cotton seed, peanut hay and soybean hulls among many other possibilities. The key is to locate a nutritious alternative feed that you can buy at a reasonable cost. Bulky feedstuffs are not a good choice if they have to be transported long distances (due to handling and freight charges).
- Consider getting together with other producers to buy feeds in large bulk quantities. You may not need or have storage space for a trailer load of cottonseed, but it could be more affordable if two or three producers bought a truckload together. Also, buying in bulk will allow you to avoid the cost of bagging the feed.
- Make sure you have the storage facilities for bulk alternative feeds. Open front sheds give protection to the feeds while still giving you easy access to the feeds. Storing some bulk feedstuffs on thick grass sod with a tarp or plastic cover is possible, but you must consider the cost and waste of the feedstuff.
- Summer creep feeding offers another option. The decision to creep feed calves hinges on whether the cost of the creep feeding is less than the value added to the calf at sale time. You can feed a variety of rations to calves. Grain and a combination of byproducts can be fed in most cases.
- Early weaning of calves is another option. By four months, a calf is only getting between 20 and 40 percent of its energy requirement from its mother. Early weaned calves fed in a dry lot or supplemented on pasture may gain a half-pound to a pound faster than nursing calves. Early weaning reduces the nutritional needs for the nursing cows by one-third to one-half. You can now move these animals to low quality forages. You can also cull and sell older or open cows.
- A final option you may want to consider is retained ownership. Retained ownership through the stocker and feedlot phase offers you some flexibility.

This information was adapted from a fact sheet written by Dr. Walt Prevatt, Extension Agricultural Economist.