

Forage conditions continue to improve in Oklahoma

With more rain and moderate temperatures, forage growth is good in Oklahoma the last half of July. Recent information from Derrell S. Peel, OSU Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist, should be helpful for producers making late summer and fall management decisions.

The majority of the state received between one and nearly 5 inches of rain in late July. Over the past 60 days, which captures most of the rain that began the third week of May, the entire state has received between 4 to nearly 17 inches of rain, which is 100 to 200 percent of normal for nearly all parts of the state.

According to the latest Drought Monitor, 60 percent of the state is in moderate or worse drought conditions (D2-D4), down only slightly from 65 percent in mid-May. However, the percent of the state in extreme or worse drought (D3-D4) is at 23 percent, down from 50 percent in mid-May and, of that, the area of exceptional drought (D4) is now less than 5 percent, down from 30 percent before the rain started in May. Waves of timely rain this summer combined with mostly moderate temperatures have allowed significant improvement of soil moisture conditions.

Pasture and range conditions show similar improvement with the percent poor and very poor now at 19 percent compared to 44 percent in May. Currently 45 percent of state pastures are rated good or excellent compared to 22 percent in May. The percentage of pastures in fair condition is mostly unchanged since May.

Improved forage conditions present several cattle and forage management and marketing opportunities this fall. Abundant and high quality forage for the remainder of summer and into fall should allow spring born calves to reach normal weaning weights and perhaps a bit more to take advantage of the value of extra calf weight gain. Normal seasonality of prices would imply that calf prices will decrease roughly seven percent between summer highs and October/November weaning. However, tight cattle supplies has trumped seasonal price patterns this year with price increases that have been stronger than seasonal in the first half of the year and may limit seasonal price pressure on calves this fall. The value of extra calf weight should remain strong through the fall.

Late summer moisture provides an opportunity to fertilize warm-season grasses such as Bermuda and stockpile high quality pasture that can reduce forage costs this fall and into winter. Though hay production should be good this summer, grazing is always significantly cheaper than feeding hay to cows and producers can use summer grazing management to extend grazing this fall and reduce hay costs. Depending on the quality, any extra hay that may be available this winter can provide flexibility to retain calves or replacement heifers, feed thin cull cows or be sold as a cash crop.

Winter wheat grazing will be very much on the minds of some wheat producers in about another month. The current surface and subsoil moisture conditions are encouraging. Unless August turns exceptionally hot and dry, it appears that decent conditions for wheat grazing may happen this fall. Adequate moisture and moderate soil temperatures in late August and early September are ideal for early establishment of wheat for grazing. Should it happen, stocker demand will support calf prices amid limited cattle supplies this fall.

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