

Cattle hoofing it for greener pastures

Experts say watch over-grazing, vaccination and supplementation

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COLLEGE STATION – Cattle “going for the green” by grazing in recovering pastures are following nature’s call, but producers should avoid over-grazing and make sure cattle still have adequate care and nutrition, said Texas AgriLife Extension Service experts.

“Many pastures in the state are getting green again, and many beef producers think they can stop feeding them hay or providing supplemental nutrition because of that,” said Rachel Bauer, AgriLife Extension agent for agriculture and natural resources in Bastrop County. “But they may need to continue to provide hay and some sort of energy supplement to meet food and nutrition requirements.”

Cows typically require 25-35 pounds of food per day, and current forage production doesn’t provide an adequate amount of intake, Bauer said. It also may not provide cattle with adequate protein.

“If we don’t get enough rain in time, there also won’t be any summer pasture, so producers need to be careful not to over-graze during this time,” she said.

Bauer added that many cattle have to graze close to the ground so producers should consider deworming and administering vaccines, especially clostridial vaccinations to prevent blackleg.

“With the drought, cattle haven’t had anything green to eat in a long time, and forage material is their natural preference, so they’ve been acting like kids in a candy store,” said Dr. Rick Machen, AgriLife Extension livestock specialist with the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center in Uvalde. “And while the quality of the forage they’re getting is very good, the quantity simply isn’t enough to fill them up.”

Machen echoed Bauer’s suggestion to be cautious of worms and blackleg.

“Typically, you see blackleg in calves, and clostridial vaccines are best given to calves when they’re 2-4 months old,” he said. “Spring de-worming and vaccinations are considered good cattle management practices, especially for nursing calves.”

Machen added that producers also would be wise to exercise “good natural resource stewardship” by allowing their pastures adequate time to grow and “re-establish the integrity of their root systems.”

“We’re seeing a lot of greening up of Bermuda grass pastureland in this area,” said Dwight Sexton, AgriLife Extension agent for agriculture and natural resources for Gonzales County. “But although the pastures have greened up, they’re still not producing enough for the cattle to graze.”

Sexton said the drought has forced many producers in his county to sell off varying portions of their herds, but remaining livestock still are receiving supplemental feed.

Steve Sturtz, AgriLife Extension agent for agriculture in Tom Green County, also said cattle management is vital to producer operations, particularly in times of drought.

“A little green is good, but producers need to use rotational grazing -- rotating groups of cattle to other pastures -- and to be careful not to overstock,” Sturtz said. “With good cattle management, they can keep their supplemental feeding to a minimum.”

“We stay adequately stocked – or I should say adequately under-stocked – and rotate our cattle to different pastures all the time, depending on conditions,” said Charlie Christensen, who raises cattle in several counties to the west of San Angelo.

“In this region it’s not economical to feed hay to cattle so we only provide protein cubes to supplement,” he said. “But we stay as lightly stocked as possible, and spread as many cattle as possible over as much land as possible. Subsequently, if it doesn’t rain for three months or so, we don’t have to go into panic mode. We can wait and sell our cattle at the right time.”

Christensen said his pastures are currently providing more than adequate forage material for the amount of cattle on them, but if it doesn’t rain in the next several weeks it may again be necessary to provide supplementation.

“Spring is usually a busy time for cattle producers,” Machen said. “It’s when most calves come and when ranchers need to vaccinate them. It’s also when the cattle get busy and move to greener pastures to forage. With all this activity, it’s important to stay on top of herd management and to take steps to ensure there’s adequate forage for the future.”

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