River Valley Beef Conference
Set for Feb. 12

The rebuilding of pastures and beef herds, as well as alternative feedstuffs and the beef cattle outlook, will be topics discussed at the 2013 River Valley Beef Cattle Conference scheduled for Feb. 12 at the I-40 Livestock Auction in Ozark, Ark.

“The drought that’s crippling the cattle industry in Arkansas is showing no signs of abating,” says Tom Troxel, University of Arkansas animal scientist. “That means cattlemen will need new tools to manage and survive if 2013 is a repeat of 2012. We hope to offer those tools at this year’s River Valley Beef Cattle Conference.”

The conference is a joint educational effort of the University of Arkansas (UA) Division of Agriculture and Farm Credit of Western Arkansas.

UA animal scientist Tom Troxel will discuss when to rebuild herds while UA Extension forage specialist John Jennings will speak on rebuilding pastures. Paul Beck, UA animal scientist, will make a presentation on uses and limitations of alternative feedstuffs for cattle. A representative from CattleFax will speak on the future of the cattle market.

The conference will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. A registration fee of $20 will be collected at the door. For more on cattle production, visit www.uaex.edu or contact your county extension office. Contact Noelle Hayes for conference information: nhayes@uaex.edu or 501-671-2177.

Controlling Grass Tetany

Grass tetany can become a problem during the months of February, March and April. This disease normally occurs in Arkansas when our cool-season forages begin to regrow in late winter and early spring. Grass tetany is due to an abnormally low level of magnesium in the cow’s body, and older lactating cows are more susceptible.

Early signs in cows affected by tetany include a decreased appetite, frequent urination, separation from the herd, increased excitability, muscle spasms and a stiff or unsteady gait. These early signs may occur for as little as two to three hours, making early detection difficult. As the disease progresses, an affected cow will lose normal muscle control. This
forces the affected animal to lie down, and it becomes unable to get up. If your cattle are not checked often, a dead cow may be the first sign of a problem.

Ruminant animals absorb magnesium from the intestinal tract much less efficiently than other species. Magnesium levels can also be low in a cow’s body due to magnesium losses in the milk during lactation or due to an increase in the cow’s potassium intake. High potassium levels occur in young, rapidly growing forage and can be a problem in cool-season grasses such as fescue or in winter annual cereal grains like wheat and oats.

Grass tetany is often directly related to influences such as rapid forage growth and heavy lactation in spring-calving cows. However, other factors such as spring fertilizer application can also increase the potential for grass tetany to occur. Heavy fertilization of grazing pastures, especially with potassium (pot ash) in the late winter or early spring, may further inhibit magnesium absorption in a cow’s intestinal system.

---

Grass tetany normally occurs in Arkansas when our cool-season forages begin to regrow in late winter and early spring.

---

Weather is another influence on the occurrence of grass tetany. Cloudy conditions decrease the plant’s ability to utilize magnesium, making it even less available to grazing animals, so tetany may be more often observed on cloudy or rainy days.

Prevention is the key to controlling grass tetany. This can be achieved by dispensing a salt-mineral supplement containing at least 10% magnesium that can be utilized daily. Successful prevention begins with providing 2 to 4 ounces of mineral supplement containing 10% magnesium oxide per animal per day. The supplement must be provided on a daily basis because the cow’s body has no ability to store up reserves. Several mineral feeders should be made available if stocking rates are higher for the herd.

For more information about grass tetany and general herd management, contact your county Extension office.

---

Is It Time for a New Herd Bull?

BRYAN KUTZ

---

It won’t be long until breeding season for herds that calve in the spring, and it is never too early to start planning. Improvement of next year’s calf crop is dependent upon the breeding decisions you are about to make.

Herd sire selection should be a thought-provoking and profit-driven decision process. Males account for approximately 90 percent of the gene pool, contributing more to the genetic makeup of a herd in one breeding season than a cow contributes in her lifetime. Selecting genetically superior sires is the fastest approach to herd improvement and ultimately bottom line profitability.

Not every bull will fit your production scenario. Resources and goals are different for each cow-calf operation. Nonetheless, sire selection should target an acceptable combination of traits that complement the strengths and weaknesses of the cow herd and match markets.

Ask questions that pertain to your particular production situation. What are your target markets? Are you selling all calves at weaning? If so, what color does that market value the most? Are you planning to background your calves and send them through the feedlot? Are you going to retain any replacement heifers? Are you breeding both heifers and cows? What are your available labor and forage resources? Answers to these questions will aid you in determining the selection efforts you may want to apply towards economically important traits such as growth, carcass traits and possible maternal performance.

Feet and leg soundness, libido, disposition, scrotal size, sheath, frame size, composition, breed type and horn presence or absence are also important traits for consideration. While one may apply more pressure on one or two traits, remember to strike a balance among various traits and avoid extremes. Base the type of sire selected on the purpose of your breeding plan.

While I strongly believe in the correct visual appraisal of an animal, the use of genetic selection with expected progeny differences (EPD) can be an extremely valuable tool. EPDs provide predictions of the expected performance of the calves sired by a bull compared to the expected performance of calves sired by another bull.

EPDs are the best predictors of the genetic performance of an individual animal, and they are available for a growing number of economically relevant traits. Breeds are different and make available a wide variety of EPDs; however,
most breeds have basic EPDs, such as birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight and milk. A large number of breeds have implemented the use of selection indices. These are based on multiple traits weighted for economic importance, heritability and genetic associations among traits. A selection index may provide a balanced selection approach when selecting for more than one trait at a time.

Beef cattle selection should be based on many factors. The knowledge gathered from your production needs and concerns is invaluable in your sire selection endeavor. The more information used in this process, the fewer surprises you will have for generations to come. It is important to use both performance information and visual appraisal in choosing a sire that suits you and your production goals. They should complement each other. A balanced approach to sire selection focusing on multiple economically important traits can go a long way towards herd genetic improvement.