Keep a Close Watch on the Cowherd

Beth Ellen Doran, Beef Program Specialist
doranb@iastate.edu
712-737-4230

As I write this, Northwest Iowa has had its fair share of blizzards and windchill advisories. The challenges are many – frozen waterers, gelling of diesel tractors and just plain COLD! Livestock producers will do the obvious – provide windbreaks and bedding, increase the amount of feed, and work to keep waterers flowing.

However, I’d encourage producers to keep a close watch on other things that can dramatically impact the success of calving. Check the body condition score (BCS) of your cows. At calving, cows should be a BCS of 5.5 to 6.5 and heifers should be in the 6 to 7 range. Cows and heifers with adequate body condition will calve easier, recover more quickly and provide higher quality colostrum and milk. Their calves have more vigor – standing up sooner after calving, nursing more rapidly and can better withstand health challenges and inclement weather.

Do NOT try to manage calving difficulty by limiting feed intake. It’s true that a fat cow with excess body condition has trouble calving, but so do thin cows! Work with your nutritionist to provide the amount of energy needed for the cow’s age, body condition and stage of production. Cows in marginal body condition will need more feed (or higher energy feed) and extra protection from the elements.

Wet weather in 2018 created challenges in putting up high quality feed. In fact, most of the forages do not have as much energy, are not as digestible, and vitamin levels are lower. If this describes your operation, test your feeds and be prepared to supplement with additional energy and vitamins.

Still, one of the cheapest sources of energy is whole shelled corn, but there is an upper limit of inclusion in the diet (in the range of 7-10 pounds/head/day). If adding corn to the ration, cows should be worked up slowly on these diets to prevent acidosis, bloat, founder and sudden death.

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Winter weather is not without its challenges as well. Check for chapped and frozen teats on the females and be prepared to provide a colostrum replacer or colostrum supplement.

With your bulls, I recommend a breeding soundness exam one month prior to turnout to determine semen quality and fertility. Still the biggest economic factor determining cow-calf profitability is number of calves weaned.

We all hope that calves are not born in extreme cold, but it does happen. Canadian animal scientists examined four methods of re-warming hypothermic (cold) calves. They found that normal body temperature was regained most rapidly when the hypothermic calf was immersed in warm (100°F) water. They also looked at this method of warming with and without a 40 cc drench of 20% ethanol in water, but concluded there was no advantage from oral administration of ethanol. Two important points when using the water immersion method – keep the calf’s head above water and dry the hair coat before returning the calf to its natural environment.

There will be a series of cow-calf meetings in Northwest Iowa featuring how the 2018 Farm Bill will impact cow-calf producers and an update on calving, nutrition, health and management. You are encouraged to pre-register, but may pay ($5/person) at the door:

- March 4 – ISU Extension and Outreach - Plymouth County Office, Le Mars. RSVP to 712-546-7835
- March 5 – ISU Extension and Outreach - Sac County Office, Sac City. RSVP to 712-662-7131
- March 6 – Public Library, Rock Rapids. RSVP to 712-472-2576

Last, take time to enjoy calving. It’s miraculous to watch a newborn calf open its eyes and take in that first breath. And, you know it’s spring when the calves are frolicking with their tails in the air and butting heads with each other. Remember, it’s the little things…

NEW Publication: available from the Iowa State University Extension Store - https://store.extension.iastate.edu
- Pasture Management Guide for Livestock Producers – AS 14 - $10
Watch Soybean Seed Germination Levels this Year

Joel DeJong, Field Agronomist
jdejong@iastate.edu
712-546-7835

Last fall was a frustrating harvest season for many. In early September, it appeared we would complete harvest in a timely manner, but then it got rainy – as it was in August. Because of this late-season wet weather and delayed harvest we observed more than the normal amount of soybean seeds from some fields showing discoloration. The disease I observed the most was Phomopsis, characterized by cracked, shriveled seeds with white chalk-colored mold on the seed surface. Phomopsis is caused by the fungus Daiporthe longicolla. Sometimes it is called Pod and Stem Blight. Across the state and the north central region, there has been quite a bit of discussion that this year’s crops of seed soybean are frequently testing positive for the Diaporthe fungus, which is resulting in lower than normal germination rates of seed.

Soil moisture levels entering winter were quite high, increasing the chance that we will have wetter than normal conditions this spring. If soil conditions are wetter and cooler than normal, this could drastically impact both the survival and stand count of plants, and diseased seedlings will struggle even more.

According to past Iowa State University research, appropriate seed treatments can increase germination rates in poorer quality beans by 10-15 percent. Given the progress and development of fungicides, germination rates could be further improved, given the right mix. Good winter storage of seed can also increase germination rates, due to the fact that under dry storage conditions, the mycelium of the fungus will die, improving the seed quality. A suggested practice is to dry-store low germ-seeds over winter and re-test the seed in February. If the germination test was conducted early, perhaps ask if they have germination data that is more recent.

When deciding on which fungicides will be the most effective, consult the Crop Protection Network's “Fungicide Efficacy for Control of Soybean Seeding Diseases,” which includes a chart rating the efficacy of fungicides for several diseases (consult the Phomopsis section for combating Diaporthe). You can find the Crop Protection Network online at https://cropprotectionnetwork.org/. This is a product of the plant disease specialists at several land-grant universities across the country, and a great resource. There are fact sheets with great pictures on every major soybean disease found in the country.

It is recommended to not use seed lots with more than 20 percent Diaporthe infection because severely infected or moldy seed will fail to germinate even after being treated.

Finally, think about the germination percent of your seed when selecting the seeding rate you will use for 2019. If you are below 90% you might want to consider slightly increasing your seeding rate.

Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy: Progress and Opportunities

Jamie Benning, Water Quality Program Manager
benning@iastate.edu
515-294-6038

The Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy (INRS) is a science and technology-based framework to reduce nutrient loss to Iowa’s surface waters and the Gulf of Mexico. The strategy, completed in 2013, identifies methods and practices to reduce total loads of nitrate-nitrogen (nitrate-N) and phosphorus (P) from both cities and industrial point sources and agricultural nonpoint sources by a combined 45 percent.

Tracking Progress. To evaluate progress of the strategy, the INRS Annual Report documents change in financial and technical assistance inputs, INRS knowledge, practices implemented on the landscape, and modeled and measured nitrate-N and P loads in water at small and large scales. In the 2018 report, 760,000 acres of cover crops were established with 329,000 acres implemented with state and federal cost-share programs and the remaining 431,000 estimated to be established by landowner, farmer and other private investment.

Implementation of edge-of-field practices that reduce nitrate loss including saturated buffers, nitrate-N removal wetlands and bioreactors, has also increased. According to available cost-share practice data, there are currently 86 nitrate-N removal wetlands installed in the state that are removing nitrate from 104,000 acres of tile drained crop land and 27 bioreactors and saturated buffers treating approximately 1,450 acres. Approximately 1.8 million acres are currently enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, a slight increase from the 1.4 million acres in 2016. While these selected practices and many others have been increasing in numbers and acres treated, approximately 12 million acres of cover crops, 7,600 wetlands, and 120,000 bioreactors will be needed to fully reach the INRS goals.

In Northwest Iowa, four local watershed projects are actively increasing practice implementation by education and outreach, cost-share financial assistance, and technical design and construction assistance.
Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy: Progress and Opportunities

The West Branch of the Floyd River Water Quality Initiative Project (https://www.cleanwateriowa.org/west-branch-of-the-floyd-river-water-quality-initiative) is engaging stakeholders through education and outreach across the agricultural community to showcase nutrient reduction practices. Public and private natural resource and agricultural partners are collaborating to increase adoption of terraces, cover crops, no-till, grassed waterways, filter strips, nutrient management, nitrification inhibitor, and subsurface P (manure) placement.

The Deep Creek Water Quality Initiative Project (https://www.cleanwateriowa.org/deep-creek-water-quality-initiative-project) in Plymouth County is implementing terraces, cover crops, no-till, grassed waterways, filter strips, nutrient management, nitrification inhibitor, and subsurface P (manure) placement.

The Headwaters of the North Raccoon River Water Quality Initiative Project (https://www.cleanwateriowa.org/headwaters-north-raccoon-river) in Buena Vista and Pocahontas Counties is focused on the implementation of bioreactors, cover crops, side-dressed and spring applied nitrogen, nitrification inhibitor, no-till, strip till, and phosphorus placement.

The Iowa Great Lakes Project (http://cleanwateralliance.net/) implemented by the Dickinson County Clean Water Alliance collaborates with stakeholders and partners to implement low impact development structures, protect shoreline with native shortgrass prairie, reconstruct wetlands and restore prairie to reduce sediment, N, and P loads entering the lakes.

Winter is a great time for planning new conservation practices. Visit your local Soil and Water Conservation District office about one of the projects listed or for information about other financial and technical assistance available in your district or watershed to help you get started.

2018-19 Outlook and Planning

Gary Wright, Farm and Agribusiness Management Specialist
gdwright@iastate.edu
712-223-1574

After about a month delay following the shutdown, the USDA recently issued their final 2018 crop reports. U.S. yields and production totals both represented slight reductions to the December report. The U.S.-China trade disagreements highlight demand, especially soybeans. Export markets are in a state of adjustment with a mix of old and new customers, led by the European Union and Mexico tripling and doubling year-to-date purchases, respectively. Prior to the tariffs, China, while still number three for soybeans, was an overwhelming destination. Clearly, the uncertainty is whether other growth, mostly smaller markets, will continue the current pace. Market grain prices continue to trade day-to-day in a range that is near or below most farm operating break-evens. Research tends to show a marketing plan, when executed with discipline, can add returns to the bottom-line. As we have moved away from this larger harvest, daily monitoring of the basis shows merit, as the end-users (feed, ethanol, etc.) intermittently require the bushels. Further, most grain purchasers offer a service where the producer can place electronic orders at well-researched prices, which can trigger sales.

Earlier this year, the annual land survey results for 2018 were released. Average state of Iowa land prices declined slightly ($62/acre or 0.8 percent). The reduction was immaterial; however, more significant is that 2018 represented the fourth year of the last five when land prices decreased. The survey was consistent with USDA and Chicago Federal Reserve Bank survey results. Factors believed most negative were lower commodity prices and slight increases to interest rates. Limited land supplies and stronger yields (stabilizing per acre revenues) were an offset to further land price reductions. As interest rates increase and/or net farm income declines, land prices soften. This points to liquidity challenges and solvency deterioration, which combine to adversely impact ag bank loan statistics.

As stated above, current market prices leave 2019 cash flow projections near or below operating break-evens for most producers. Attention toward Crop Year 2019 expense management decisions mandate detailed enterprise results. This means by commodity, by farm, by lease, etc., with the key goal from this analysis being “Is each individual enterprise making a direct contribution to overall farm results?” When enterprise revenues will not cover the variable expenses, the tough questions have to be asked. These possible financial planning steps might help boost overall cash flows, consistent with creditor approvals and/or good communications:

- Government (Market Facilitation Program/MFP) Payments – take appropriate actions if/when in some instances these one-time, helpful cash infusions were delayed by the government shutdown or year-end, tax planning.
- Right-sizing the Balance Sheet – aligning current, intermediate and long-term assets and liabilities will typically improve working capital (if liquidity is the immediate challenge and solvency affords). As much as possible, avoid pre-payment penalties from re-structured debt to afford long-term interest cost savings. Although interest rates are showing slight upticks, overall costs of debt capital remains historically low.
- Capital Frugality – consistent with repair/maintenance experiences, meager returns warrant careful return-on-investment decisions for every long-term M&E purchase. Avoid letting a short-run tax planning step sub-optimize the overall, long-term best financial planning. Minimize over-capacity by sharing M&E ownership and maximize selling-off less productive assets.
- Non-Farm Income – part/full time work off-the-farm will supplement cash flows, especially non-farm living costs.
- Crop Insurance / Farm Bill – announcements on the recently-approved, 2019-23 farm bill aren’t expected for several months; however, producers will face much sooner crop insurance decisions. For brevity here, please consider projected February insurance prices for (a) soybeans are running ~ 60 cents below a year ago; and (b) corn prices are slightly higher than year ago guarantees. Further, the PLC v. ARC decision used alongside SCO might offer some advantage worthy of an early-contact with your crop insurance agent. Another decision tool might be https://www.rma.usda.gov/Fact-Sheets/National-Fact-Sheets/Supplemental-Coverage-Option-2018.

Farm decision making is complex. If you want to review marketing plans or help in analyzing your operation for best decisions, please do not hesitate to call, or even if you need some help with the very valuable, Ag Decision Maker (https://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm/).
Mar. 5 • Child Care Training at 6:30-8:30 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 6 • 2019 Ornamental & Turf Applicators Training at 9:00-11:30 am • Storm Lake
Mar. 10 • 4-H Basketball Festival at 1:00-5:00 pm • Newell/Fonda High School
Mar. 11 • Buena Vista Co. Fair Board Meeting at 6:00 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 12 • Buena Vista Co. Extension Council Meeting at 5:30 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 13 • 2019 Certified Handlers Applicator Training at 9:00-11:30 am • Storm Lake
Mar. 14 • Bee Keeping Workshop at 6:30 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 19 • Find out about "Seed Savers" at 5:30 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 24 • Rabbit Hopping Dem./Showmanship Clinic at 1:30-3:30 pm • Storm Lake
Mar. 26 • ServSafe Training at 9:00 am-6:00 pm • Storm Lake
Apr. 5 • Commercial Manure Certification (free) at 9:00-11:30 am • Storm Lake
Apr. 7 • 4-H Endowment Breakfast Fundraiser at 9:00 am-12:30 pm • Storm Lake
Apr. 15 • Private Pesticide Applicator CIC at 9:00 am • Storm Lake

Private Pesticide Applicator CIC in surrounding counties:
Mar. 7 • Private Pesticide Applicator CIC at 7:00 p.m. • Cherokee High School
Mar. 13 • Private Pesticide Applicator CIC at 1:30 pm • Ida Grove Rec. Center
April 12 & 15 • Private Pesticide Applicator CIC at 9:00 am • Sac County
April 12 • Private Pesticide Applicator CIC at 9:00 am & 1:00 pm • Pocahontas Co.

Mark Your Calendar Now for Upcoming Fairs:
Buena Vista County Fair - July 5-8, 2019
Iowa State Fair - August 8-18, 2019
Clay County Fair - September 7-15, 2019

https://www.extension.iastate.edu/countyservices/

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