

# Nature's Reward For Working With Her Is A Reduction In Cattle Production Costs

By Steven D. Lukefahr

KINGSVILLE, Texas: In recent presentations, tours, and visits with ranchers, if I could earn a penny for every time I've used the phrase "Working with Nature" I could indeed retire. The reason is because this is such an important focus in my beef cattle business.

You may ask: Why so important? An anticipated response would be: To make more money. However, for me personally it is more about leaving the land in a better state and building relationships with landowners, rather than examining my new monthly bank statement.

In the November 2013 issue of

SGF, I penned an article about my new drought management model. The article explained the model, which emphasized the need to work with Nature, especially to avoid economic disaster.

A brief overview of the article is that by conserving the forage base (which is even more critical during serious drought) and using appropriate genetics, production costs can be dramatically reduced and a profit can still be made.

The model also assumes the timely implementation of various practices (e.g., adjusting stocking rates, rotational grazing, and culling less productive cows and sometimes even selling yearling breeding heifers).



**By always leaving the grass tall when leaving a paddock, Lukefahr has largely eliminated internal parasites in his herd's calves.**

One of several key components of the drought management model is the use of genetically adaptable cattle, which in my herd consists of a crossbred composite of Red Angus, Senepol, and Tuli breeds.

In 2013, a year of exceptional drought, 20 percent of the cowherd

*Continued on p. 4*

## ***Nature's Reward***

*Continued from p. 1*

was sold and stocking rates were reduced by 50 percent to about 16 acres per cow. Half of the remaining cowherd was moved to temporary leases so that main permanent pastures would not be overgrazed to maintain healthy plant communities.

By implementing these decisions in a timely manner, it was not necessary to feed hay or expensive supplements or wean calves early. Cows were bred on schedule between mid-July and the end of August so that calves would be born mostly in May of the following year.

Between mid-July and the end of September, 20 inches of rain was received. Pastures literally exploded! Whereas at the peak of the drought there was less than 1,000 pounds of forage per acre, by mid-fall this figure increased to about 3,300 pounds per acre. In early September, cattle were returned to permanent pastures albeit at conservative stocking rates while pastures continued to recover which may still take a couple of years.

Over the next two months, cattle expressed their genetic ability to

flesh out quickly on green grass. In fact, between birth and weaning, bull calves had an overall rate of gain of 2.60 lbs/day. However, two months prior to weaning there were certainly major compensatory gains achieved in excess of three lbs/day - only on grass.

By November, all calves were weighed. The actual (non-adjusted) average for weights of calves was 545 pounds at an average age of 187 days. For 2013, the average feed cost per cow was \$19.51 and total cost per cow was \$345 (half this cost was in lease payments). Despite the drought and considering record high feeder prices, a good profit was made in 2013.

The drought management model, which pivots around working with Nature, is the basis for my business and/or management decisions. As 2013 was drawing to a close (a big sigh of relief!), I contemplated on still other ways that I could fine-tune my model of working even more closely with Nature. In the late fall, I applied several practices to achieve this goal, which is explained in this article.

### ***FORAGE STOCKPILING***

As previously stated, by mid-fall



**By overwintering his heifers unweaned on the mothers, Steven Lukefahr has cut his wintering costs to less than five dollars a calf.**

there was an estimated 3,300 pounds per acre of forage. Across my main permanent leases (a total of about 500 acres), most pastures had not been grazed for months. There is now enough stockpiled forage available to last to the fall of this year.

Although I have been stockpiling forage for years, this practice sets the stage for other innovative, cost-reducing practices (as well as avoiding certain costly practices) as mentioned below. Of course, stockpiled forage is best utilized with the practice of rotational grazing.

Readers know that there are various systems of rotational grazing, but I am being general for the purpose of this article. One benefit of rotational grazing livestock on tall and dense stands of forage is that it serves as an effective barrier against internal parasites, which are typically found close to ground level. It has been

three years now since I last used chemical dewormers.

To further ensure that my cattle do not have parasite issues, I use a 2:1 mix of loose minerals to diatomaceous earth, which is regularly provided to the entire herd. If you are not familiar with diatomaceous earth, it looks like ground chalk but consists of microscopically-small fossils of organisms called diatoms.

Diatoms have sharp edges made of silica that are believed to wreak havoc on worms by literally ripping them to pieces while not harming the gut wall of the animal. Soon I may decide to add dried kelp meal for possible enhanced nutritional benefits.

For years I have weaned calves in the fall. With typical fall rains and the last flush of grass before winter, I considered this as an ideal time to wean (as opposed to calendar age

