Damage from the Hurricanes

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We received a number of phone calls from the press regarding how well cattle survived the hurricanes. They imagined dead cows lying everywhere and were surprised when told that the storm killed very few cows. At the Range Cattle Research Center we lost one bull out of 1,200 animals on inventory. This was an Angus bull that chose to weather the storm under a huge live oak tree that was up rooted by the winds, and the bull was buried underneath.

I am sure some cattlemen lost more animals, but usually very few cattle are killed by hurricanes. The most damage caused by hurricane force winds is fallen trees on fences. Winds also do considerable damage to tin buildings and tin roofs. We lost a large 40 year old metal equipment barn, a shed over two fuel storage tanks, and a greenhouse.

We had little damage to two metal hay storage barns and a large metal research feeding barn. These metal barns were constructed in the last five years to hurricane code and they met the challenge.

It is rainfall that causes the most damage to a cattle operation. Water from one hurricane, much less three, can stand around for weeks. Although in low spots water can hurt the grass, it is long periods of standing water underneath the grass on improved pastures that greatly affects animal performance. Apparently the grass becomes water logged and cattle are unable to consume enough nutrients to sustain lactation by the cow and growth of the calf.

Some years ago we compared two breeding seasons for cows wintered in the woods and summered on bahiagrass pasture. Calves were weaned at 8 months of age. Calves from the earlier breeding season were weaned in August and
those from the later breeding season were weaned in November.

At the same age, calves weaned in August averaged 54 pounds heavier at weaning than calves weaned in November (four years of data). The primary cause of the lighter weight for calves weaned in November was heavy late summer-early fall rainfall which negatively affects cow weight and condition, and calf weaning weight. In 1994, 37 inches of rain fell in the August-November period. Calves weaned in November were 116 pounds lighter at weaning than calves weaned in August, and cows lost 105 pounds of body weight.

The solution to preventing reductions in calf weaning weight and cow weight and body condition caused by standing water is to use a winter breeding season. Most ranchers in south Florida put out bulls in December or January. Calves are born in October - January period, and weaned and marketed in June - August prior to the occurrence of water logged pastures caused by heavy summer and early fall rains. Also, the feeder calf market is usually far better in June - August than in September - November.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate