

Cattle thefts are at an all-time high in the state largely due to high beef prices, according to industry and state officials. So far this year, ranchers across the state have reported 835 cattle thefts, a 16 percent increase compared to 2012, when about 700 cattle were stolen during the first 10 months of the year.

"I believe this is the highest that we have had historically since we have been collecting the data," said Blayne Arthur, state Department of Agriculture associate commissioner. Arthur said the increase in thefts can be tied to the price of cattle. "Beef prices have been trending upward over the past few years and a lot of that is due to a decrease in the beef herd, in part, due to the drought," Arthur said. With cattle selling between \$1 and \$1.50 per pound, each head can easily be worth \$1,000 or more, she said. "That's quite a bit of money. If you steal 10 or 20 or 30 head, it adds up pretty quick," Arthur said. A bill passed in 2001 authorized the state agriculture department to hire its own agents to arrest horse thieves and cattle rustlers. Launched with just two investigators, today the agency has 10 individuals who investigate livestock thefts, arson investigations in forests and timber thefts. "Usually, the cases that we receive come from the sheriff's office and we work collaboratively with them and OHP and OSBI," Arthur said. The state unit has filed 274 felony charges thus so far this year.

But not all cattle-theft cases are passed on to the Department of Agriculture investigative unit, Arthur said. The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association also investigates cases of cattle theft in Oklahoma. The association employs 30 "special rangers" stationed throughout Oklahoma and Texas who investigate thefts for its members. One of the cases being worked this year by the TSCRA involves a theft reported from an Okmulgee ranch. Nineteen cows and calves valued at more than \$100,000 were discovered missing from the Langford Hereford cattle ranch beginning in September. The cattle, highly valued because of their genetic makeup, were taken despite being branded, tattooed and ear tagged. Within weeks, TSCRA investigators arrested

a Haskell woman in connection with the cattle thefts. Special Ranger Bart Perrier said last week that he continues to work on the Langford ranch thefts. Suzy Langford said about half the cattle have been recovered so far from sale barns in Oklahoma and other states. Preventing cattle thefts can be a challenge. Perrier described the crime as "low risk, high reward." Langford said they have reviewed security procedures as best they can. Gates are locked and all cattle are branded and regularly checked, she said. But "our pastures are scattered over several miles." Staff will no longer be keeping pens in remote pastures, believed to have been where the thieves loaded cattle, she said. "It just makes it harder for us," Langford said. "But what else can you do?" Perrier could not say whether the TSCRA is seeing an increase in reported thefts. "I don't know if there is an increase ... it just never goes away," Perrier said, adding that "drugs fuel 98 percent of it." He said investigating cattle thefts in Oklahoma can be somewhat challenging. Livestock brand registration is voluntary in Oklahoma, unlike Texas and other states, Perrier said. A registered brand is a primary means to determine livestock ownership because, Perrier said, "black Angus cows all look the same." In Oklahoma, there are about 13,000 brands registered through a voluntary program managed by the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association. The figure includes horse brands and ranches with multiple brands. Cattlemen's Association spokeswoman Chancey Hanson said the agency favors voluntary brand registration. As with the TSCRA, the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association offers a \$10,000 reward for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of individuals who steal cattle, Hanson said. A felony conviction on larceny of domestic animals carries a prison term of three years to 10 years imprisonment. Curtis Killman 918-581-8471