

# ***COW/CALF CORNER***

## ***The Newsletter***

From the **Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service**

**January 4, 2008**

### **In this Issue:**

#### **Beef Demand Limited by Competing Meats and Macroeconomic Concerns**

Derrell S. Peel, OSU Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

#### **The 3 Stages of Parturition**

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

## **Beef Demand Limited by Competing Meats and Macroeconomic Concerns**

Derrell S. Peel, OSU Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

Through most of 2007 strong beef supply fundamentals kept bumping into a demand ceiling that resulted in a crushing squeeze on feedlot and packer margins. Current indications are that demand concerns will increase in 2008 and industry margins may worsen or, at best, fail to improve. Poor macroeconomic news continues to weigh on beef demand with accumulating indications of general weakness in the U.S. economy. It is not so much that any one indicator represents a definite problem but rather the expanding set of indications in various sectors of the economy that suggest looming dark clouds. Many economists agree that the threat of a recession is higher and growing.

Consumer morale and discretionary consumer spending has been impacted by the home mortgage crisis, slumping housing values, high fuel costs, and a weaker dollar (which makes imported products more expensive). Disappointing holiday sales and poor housing sales data indicate that consumers are less inclined or able to compensate for a generally weak business sector in recent months. This week's news only contributes to the problem. Early in the week crude oil touched \$100 a barrel for the first time; sending chills through markets. On Friday, the latest jobs report indicated that unemployment rose to 5 percent in December, not bad by historical standards, but a concern now and the highest rate in two years.

Beef demand is also a function of the availability and price of competing meats. The December Hog and Pig report confirmed that the pork industry in the U.S. continues to expand, following rapid increases in pork production in the last half of 2007. Broiler production is expected to

increase in 2008 as well. Increased pork and poultry production will keep competing meat prices down and temper beef prices as well. There are indications that consumers have responded, not so much by eating less beef, but by “trading down”, that is, buying less expensive beef cuts and by reducing away from home consumption. Several restaurants reported weak sales in late 2007 and a recent survey by the National Restaurant Association indicates that only 16 percent of restaurant operators expect business conditions to improve in the first half of 2008 while 41 percent expect conditions to worsen.

Economists define demand for a product as the willingness and ability of consumers to purchase different quantities of the product at various prices. At the current high prices, there is already a limit on the quantity of beef that people will purchase. Beyond that, there are significant and probably growing factors that will further limit both the ability and willingness of consumers to buy beef. High fuel prices and rising unemployment reduce discretionary incomes and the ability of consumers to purchase beef. Willingness to purchase is influenced by several factors. Overall, beef is still popular and there is no indication that people do not want to eat beef. However, increasing supplies of cheaper alternative meats means that consumers will be more willing to substitute other meats for beef. In 2007, beef demand was probably best characterized as a ceiling that limited beef and cattle price increases. As we begin 2008, increasingly ominous beef demand factors could cause the ceiling to begin dropping, thereby making industry margins even worse and impacting cattle prices to a greater extent.

## **The 3 Stages of Parturition**

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

As the spring calving season approaches, an increased understanding of the parturition process is helpful. The more we understand about the physiology of the process, the more likely we are to make sound decisions about providing assistance. Parturition or “calving” is generally considered to occur in three stages.

**Stage 1:** The first stage of parturition is dilation of the cervix. The normal cervix is tightly closed right up until the cervical plug is completely dissolved. In stage 1, cervical dilation begins some 4 to 24 hours before the completion of parturition. During this time the “progesterone block” is no longer present and the uterine muscles are becoming more sensitive to all factors that increase the rate and strength of contractions. At the beginning, the contractile forces primarily influence the relaxation of the cervix but uterine muscular activity is still rather quiet. Stage 1 is likely to go completely unnoticed, but there may be some behavioral differences such as isolation or discomfort. At the end of stage one, there may be some behavioral changes such as elevation of the tail, switching of the tail and increased mucous discharge. Also relaxation (softening) of the pelvic ligaments near the pinbones may become visually evident, giving a “sunken” appearance on each side of the tailhead. Checking for complete cervical dilation is important before forced extraction (“pulling”) of the calf is attempted.

**Stage 2:** The second stage of parturition is defined as the delivery of the newborn. It begins with the entrance of the membranes and fetus into the pelvic canal and ends with the completed birth of the calf. So the second stage is the one in which we really are interested. This is where we find all of the action. Clinically, and from a practical aspect we would define the beginning of stage 2 as the appearance of membranes or water bag at the vulva. The traditional texts, fact sheets, magazines, and other publications that we read state that stage 2 in cattle lasts from 2 to 5 hours. Data from Oklahoma State University and the USDA experiment station at Miles City, Montana, would indicate that stage two is MUCH shorter. In these studies, assistance was given if stage two progressed more than two hours after the appearance of water bag at the vulva. The interesting thing about the data was that the heifers calving **unassisted**, did so in one hour after the initiation of stage two, and mature cows calved within 22 minutes of the initiation of stage two. Those that took longer needed assistance. These and other data would indicate that normal stage two of parturition would be redefined as approximately 60 minutes for heifers and 30 minutes for adult cows. In heifers, not only is the pelvic opening smaller, but also the soft tissue has never been expanded. Older cows have had deliveries before and birth should go quite rapidly unless there is some abnormality such as a very large calf, backwards calf, leg back or twins. **Know your limitations. Seek professional veterinary help soon if you encounter a problem that cannot be solved easily in minutes.**

**Stage 3:** The third stage of parturition is the shedding of the placenta or fetal membranes. In cattle this normally occurs in less than 8 to 12 hours. The membranes are considered retained if after 12 hours they have not been shed. Years ago it was considered necessary to remove the membranes by manually “unbuttoning” the attachments. Research has shown that manual removal can be detrimental to uterine health and future conception rates. Administration of antibiotics usually will guard against infection and the placenta will slough out in 4 to 7 days. Contact your veterinarian for the proper management of retained placenta.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.