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COW/CALF CORNER

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The April USDA Cattle on Feed report should further boost the stronger market tone of this week that has begun to offset the market weakness of recent weeks. Feedlot placements in March were 89 percent of a year earlier, somewhat lower than most pre-report expectations. Likewise, March feedlot marketings were higher than expected at a level just equal to last year. The combined effect of lower placements and higher marketings helped pull the April 1 on-feed inventory to a level equal to one year earlier and slightly lower than expected.

The decrease in placements has been expected and is expected to continue in April and May as supplies of yearling feeders are expected to remain tight. Placements in the Southern Plains were even less than the average with Oklahoma among the lowest at 74 percent of one year ago.

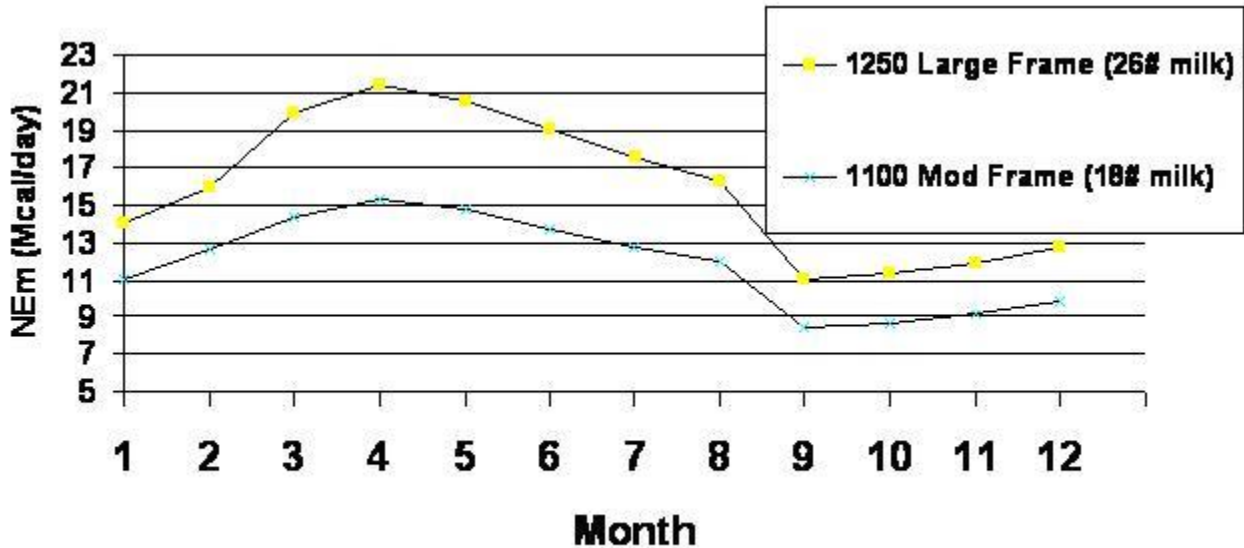
Among the top feeding states only Nebraska had placements larger than last year.

These are Not Your Grandfather's Cows

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

Mature weight and milk production of MANY commercial beef cows are both greater than they were 30 to 40 years ago. Many ranchers have not recently weighed the adult cows in their herd to know what average mature weight to expect. Therefore most commercial ranchers would

underestimate the mature size of their cows. To expect large, heavy-milking cows to be in moderate body condition at calving and maintain condition through breeding, they must receive more feed than smaller lighter-milking cows. The graph below uses the 1996 National Research Council's guidelines to show the energy needs of two different body types and levels of milk production. These energy requirements would be representative for cows calving in February and March and weaned in October. The top line represents the energy needs of 1250 pound heavy-milking beef cows versus the lower line which represents the needs of 1100 pound moderate-milking beef cows. The values graphed are the megacalories per day required to maintain body weight throughout the year.



The larger heavier-milking cow requires about 34% more energy on the average for an entire year. Consequently, an operation that was carrying 100 of the smaller cows must carry only 66 of the larger cows in order to utilize the same quantity of forage from that farm or ranch. She also will need 34% more winter hay and supplement to maintain body condition.

Because we have very high feed and fertilizer prices, this is a time to re-consider herd size to better fit the stocking rates required. Reduced stocking rates will be necessary on improved pastures if lower amounts of fertilizer are applied. The larger mature cow size also impacts the principle of percent body weight needed for heifers to reach puberty. Many ranchers underestimate the target weight for replacement heifers. If the cow eventually will be 1000 pounds, the target for heifers is 650 pounds; if she is going to be the 1250 pound cow in the preceding graph, then she needs to weigh 812 pounds going into her first breeding season to expect a high cycling and pregnancy rate.

“Pros” and “Cons” of One Calving Season versus Two Calving Seasons

Glenn Selk, OSU Extension Cattle Reproduction Specialist

Deciding on the use of one calving season or two calving seasons is a big first decision when producers are choosing calving seasons. Many fall calving seasons have arisen from elongated spring seasons. Two calving seasons fits best for herds with more than 80 cows. To take full advantage of the economies of scale, a ranch needs to produce at least 20 steer calves in the same season to realize the price advantage associated with increased lot size. Therefore having forty cows in each season as a minimum seems to make some sense.

Using two seasons instead of just one can reduce bull costs a great deal. Properly developed and cared-for bulls can be used in both the fall and the spring, therefore reducing the bull battery by half.

Another small advantage to having two calving seasons is the capability of taking fall-born heifers and holding them another few months to go in to the spring season and visa versa. Because of this replacement heifers are always 2 1/2 years at first calving instead of 2 years old. These heifers should be more likely to breed early in the breeding season and have slightly less calving difficulty. Research has shown that these differences are very small, therefore the cost of the other six months feed must be minimal to make this a paying proposition. A disadvantage to breeding heifers to calve at 30 months is found when "open" heifers are culled. They are too old to go the feedlot and produce high grading carcasses that are available for some international markets. Therefore, the older, open heifers will be discounted heavily when marketed after an unsuccessful attempt to get them bred.

Many producers like the dual calving seasons because of the spread of the marketing risk. Having half of the calf crop sold at two different times allows for some smoothing of the cattle cycle roller coaster ride. It is important that an adequate number of calves be born together to a make a marketable package that will not be discounted because of small lot size.

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