

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Interpreting the Cattle Report: Revisions Make a Difference

Derrell S. Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist

USDA's latest Cattle report changes our view of what the situation has been as well as what we can expect in the coming year. While the overall cattle inventory was unchanged, revisions to

the 2012 numbers in several categories affect the interpretation of the report. The inventory of all cattle and calves was 89.3 million head, down 1.6 percent from the unrevised 2012 value.

The estimated inventory of beef cows on January 1, 2013 was 29.3 million head, down 2.9 percent from last year. However, the estimate for January 1, 2012 was increased by 275,000 head, which means that the decrease from 2011 to 2012 was not as severe as earlier indicated. Though the drop in beef cow numbers in 2012 was larger in percentage terms than pre-report estimates, the overall level of inventory is pretty close to what was expected. In other words, we had a bigger drop from a bigger total and ended up about where we thought we would be. Almost all of the revision in beef cow numbers was in Oklahoma and Texas suggesting that cow liquidation in 2011 was not as severe as earlier estimated in those two states. By contrast, Texas lost even more beef cows in 2012, down 12 percent, while Oklahoma beef cow numbers dropped a modest 1.3 percent in 2012.

The estimate for beef replacement heifers was also revised in the new report. For January 1, 2012, an additional 50,000 head of beef replacement heifers was added to the estimates for Nebraska and Oklahoma. This means that the inventory of beef replacement heifers at the beginning of 2012 was up 2.4 percent. The estimated inventory of beef replacement heifers for January 1, 2013 was up 1.9 percent year over year. The replacement heifers indicate, more than anything else, the contrast between what the industry would like to do compared to what they are able to do. Though the 2012 inventory of beef replacement heifers was up, the drought and continued beef cow liquidation meant that a very low percentage of those potential replacement heifers actually entered the herd. The 2013 numbers show are even more pronounced in this respect. The 2013 beef replacement heifer inventory is 18.3 percent of the beef cow herd inventory, the highest replacement percentage since 1995. However, it depends entirely on whether drought condition moderate to determine what percentage of those heifers may actually enter the herd in 2013. In any event, even with a larger pool of potential replacement heifers, the potential for herd expansion in 2013 is still rather limited. It would require another significant drop in beef cow slaughter combined with a high percentage of this heifer pool to be actually placed into the herd to achieve more than stabilization of beef cow herd numbers. Limited beef cow herd expansion is possible in 2013 but it will require almost perfect conditions with respect to cow culling and heifer placement. The ongoing drought conditions do not make that likely.

Finally, downward revisions in the 2012 estimates in other heifers and steers mean that the 2013 estimated feeder supply was actually up slightly... but from an even bigger decrease in the estimated 2012 feeder supply. The combined inventory of calves, steers and other heifers was down 1.5 percent but the decreased feedlot inventory resulted in a slight increase in the residual feeder supply. With a smaller forecasted 2013 calf crop and reduced cattle imports, the squeeze on feeder supplies will continue. Without continued reductions in feedlot inventories, the feeder

supply will continue to shrink. And, if conditions permit, increased heifer retention will further squeeze feeder supplies in the coming years.

Can We Have More Drought Related Problems Ahead This Spring?

Dave Sparks DVM, Oklahoma State University Extension Area Veterinarian

The unique conditions leading into the spring of 2013 may be leading us into even more potential problems. A dry growing season last summer combined with poor forage growth in the fall has left almost no standing forage in many pastures. In short, as we approach spring there is not much out there, and if forecasts are correct conditions for spring growth may not be great either. On the cow side of the pasture/ livestock equation, in many cases we are looking at some mighty hungry individuals. Hay is scarce and expensive and concentrates are higher than many of us can remember them ever being. This has led many producers to design a management program to “get ‘em through the winter” rather than meeting the cattle’s nutritional requirements.

Under good growing conditions the primary plants have no trouble holding their own, but under poor or marginal conditions of soil fertility and moisture the less desirable species become much stronger competitors. Additionally in many of these pastures some of the perennial grasses and forbs have died, leaving a vacuum that undesirable species may well fill. Many of these undesirable species have the potential to be toxic to livestock if consumed in sufficient quantities. Nature’s normal defense against toxicity problems is that most toxic plants have very poor palatability and are not usually consumed if more desirable forage plants are present in adequate supply. In our current scenario, however, along comes old mama cow. After months of not having her dry matter intake requirements met she is just looking for anything that will satisfy her hunger, and under the circumstances it may be toxic species that she would not ordinarily choose to consume.

There are a wide variety of plants with toxic potential in Oklahoma pastures. Many of them we don’t think of as toxic because they don’t usually cause problems under normal circumstances, but the potential is there. Several different plants can cause gastrointestinal upsets, including oleander, ivy, iris, pokeberry, wisteria, and mistletoe. (Oh, no, surely not the state flower!) Lupine causes breathing difficulty. Mushrooms can cause gastrointestinal upset and breathing difficulty. Oak leaves and shoots, under certain conditions, can cause kidney damage which may not show up until weeks or months after the toxin is ingested. Oral irritation is caused by ingesting poison ivy, poison oak, rosary pea, and castor bean.

There are many other plants that have the potential to cause toxicity. Some of these would be cockle burr, red maple, common yarrow, wild onion, Indian hemp, milk weed, aster, beggersticks, musk thistle, larkspur, curly dock, nightshades, and death camas. This is by no means a complete list and the species found in your area will vary greatly. If in doubt enlist the help of your local veterinarian or take a sample of suspect plants to your county extension office for identification.

It is impossible to eliminate all risk from plant toxicity, especially during the spring green up but the following practices can help minimize risk and cut losses.

- Don't overgraze.
- Do not introduce cattle to new pastures while they are hungry. Give them a chance to fill up on good palatable hay so they start to graze selectively.
- Turn a few older, low-value individuals into new areas first. If they experience no difficulty follow a day later with their herd-mates.
- Spend time with your cattle and note what they are eating. If you don't recognize the plants have them identified by someone who can help.
- Watch closely for diarrhea, rapid breathing, staggers, or other signs of distress. If you observe these signs early and move affected animals to another pasture many of them will recover uneventfully.

As a cattle producer today you have plenty to worry about with the drought and high input costs for feed, fuel, and fertilizer. Don't let toxic plants cull your herd the hard way.

Signs of Impending Calving in Cows or Heifers

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

As the spring calving season begins, the cows will show typical signs that will indicate parturition is imminent. Changes that are gradually seen are udder development, or making bag and the relaxation and swelling of the vulva. These indicate the cow is due to calve in the near future. There is much difference between individuals in the development of these signs and certainly age is a factor. The first calf heifer, particularly in the milking breeds, develops udder

for a very long time, sometimes for two or three months before parturition. The swelling and relaxation of the vulva can be highly variable too. Typically, in the immediate 2 weeks preceding calving, these signs become more evident, the udder is filling, and one of the things that might be seen is the loss of the cervical plug. This is a very thick tenacious, mucous material hanging from the vulva. It may be seen pooling behind the cow when she is lying down. Some people mistakenly think this happens immediately before calving, but in fact this can be seen weeks before parturition and therefore is only another sign that the calving season is here.

The immediate signs that usually occur within 24 hours of calving would be relaxation of the pelvic ligaments and strutting of the teats. These can be fairly dependable for the owner that watches his cows several times a day during the calving season. The casual observer who is knowledgeable of the signs but sees the herd infrequently cannot accurately predict calving time from these signs. The relaxation of the pelvic ligaments really cannot be observed in fat cows, (body condition score 7 or greater). However, relaxation of the ligaments can be seen very clearly in thin or moderate body condition cows and can be a clue of parturition within the next 12 - 24 hours.

These changes are signs the producer or herdsman can use to more closely pinpoint calving time. Strutting of the teats is not really very dependable. Some heavy milking cows will have strutting of the teats as much as two or three days before calving and on the other hand, a thin poor milking cow may calve without strutting of the teats. Another thing that might be seen in the immediate 12 hours before calving would be variable behavior such as a cow that does not come up to eat, or a cow that isolates herself into a particular corner of the pasture. However, most of them have few behavioral changes until the parturition process starts. Much more information about managing cows and heifers during the calving season can be found in the Oklahoma State University Extension Circular [E-1006, "Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers"](#).