

# **COW/CALF CORNER**

The Newsletter

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## **It's Spring But Cattle Markets Are Still Frozen**

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There seems to be a chill on cattle markets...both literally and figuratively. Cattle markets remain hunkered down due to weather and other impacts. The unrelenting cold, wet spring continues to have a variety of impacts on both the supply and demand sides of cattle and beef markets. Domestic beef demand is stagnant and certainly seems to be lacking the seasonal push

that usually accompanies warm weather. Choice boxed beef cutout has been hovering near the \$190.cwt. range with little sense of direction the past three weeks. The Choice-Select Spread has widened seasonally but is the result of weaker Select values rather than strength in Choice values. International demand for U.S. beef has also weakened amid Russian concerns with Ractopamine and weakness in major markets, such as Mexico. where relatively high U.S. beef values have been aggravated by a somewhat stronger dollar since January.

There is growing evidence that extended cold weather has increased beef cow liquidation. Total beef cow slaughter has been up 11.1 percent the last 4 weeks after declining early in the year. Year to date beef cow slaughter is now down a scant 3.7 percent from last year. Increased beef cow slaughter appears to be regionally widespread, though regional slaughter data are incomplete. In Region 6, the Southern Plains, beef cow slaughter has been up 15.2 percent the last four weeks but is still down nearly 12 percent for the year to date. Oklahoma auction data confirms the recent increase in cow culling as cow and bull volumes in federally reported auctions have been up nearly 23 percent since mid-March after declining over 24 percent from January through mid-March.

The latest Cattle on Feed report also suggests weather impacts on feeder markets. Unexpectedly large March feedlot placements were largely concentrated in Texas and Kansas. The Kansas placements were mostly heavy weight feeders from winter backgrounding programs. In contrast, the Texas placements were spread across lightweight to heavier feeder cattle and were likely partly the result of drought induced sales. Some may have been directly from cow-calf liquidations and others the result of forage shortages in winter stocker programs. The fact that large placements occurred in conjunction with weak feeder cattle prices suggests that the movement was more of a supply driven market situation rather than demand driven.

The Cattle on Feed numbers may also suggest implications for the broader cow herd. The number of heifers on feed has fallen sharply since the middle of 2012. The April 1 heifer on feed inventory was down 7.6 percent year over year. However, this value is less of a decrease than the January 1 heifer on-feed total, which was down 9.5 percent from the previous year. This likely indicates that much of the increased feedlot placements were heifers, probably including some heifers designated as replacements in the January inventory report. The combination of increased beef cow slaughter and relatively more heifers on feed at this point likely means that any prospects to avoid additional beef herd liquidation in 2013 may already be seriously eroded.

## **Short Term Calf Removal**

Short-term calf removal is the term that describes the temporary physical separation of the calf from its mother. This removes the nursing stimulus from the cow for about 2 days. Removal of the suckling stimulus for two days has the effect of “fooling mother nature” as some of the cows will begin to produce and release the hormones that cause the cow to return to heat cycles. The care of the calf during that 48 hours is actually quite simple. Most producers will make certain that calves access to some "sweet" feed, high quality hay and plenty of fresh drinking water. The calves will eat very little during this time.

Removal of calves for 48 hours has been shown to improve rebreeding rates of moderately conditioned (Body Condition Score = 5) cows by 4-8%. (See table 1.) This improvement although, seemingly small in magnitude is large compared to the out-of-pocket investment. Short-term calf removal can be used at the first of the breeding season or in the middle or both depending on the labor situation. Short term calf removal is not a powerful enough stimulus to "jump start" very thin cows. Those that are in a body condition score of 4 or less may need to have the calves weaned completely to allow the cow to recycle early in the upcoming breeding season.

Table 1. Summary of 3 trials comparing 48 hour short term calf removal to cow/calf pairs that were traditionally suckled. ([Simms, et al. 1982 KSU Cattleman's Day](#))

Treatment	No. Cows	% pregnant at palpation	Calf A.D.G.
Control	101	87.1	1.60
Removed	86	93.0	1.63

Those cows that calve in the Body Condition Score 6 or fatter can be expected to return to estrus early in the breeding season and should have high rebreeding rates. Although not harmful, the practices of early weaning, short-term calf removal, or feeding extra feed will NOT show significant advantages for these cows. Therefore producers will want to continue their normal lactating cow supplementation programs until warm season grass provides the nutrients that these cows need. Concerns about calf health and growth are overcome by comparing the average daily gain over the entire seven months of calf nursing. Those that were removed from the cows for 48 hours grew as rapidly and had similar weaning weights as those who were never removed from their mothers.

Short term calf removal will test the quality of the fences that separate the calves from the cows. Keep a watchful eye on the cattle during this time frame so that any breakdown in fencing can be noticed soon and cattle can be returned to the proper pasture or lot as soon as possible. This is not the time to take a two-day vacation to Las Vegas!

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