

COW/CALF CORNER

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Cattle Inventory Report Shows What Happened in 2013 and What May Happen in 2014

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

As expected, the annual cattle inventory report confirmed that the U.S. cattle herd continued to liquidate in 2013. The inventory of all cattle and calves was 87.7 million head, down 1.8 percent from one year ago and the smallest total U.S. cattle herd since 1951. The beef cow inventory was 29.0 million head, down 0.9 percent from last year and the smallest beef cow herd since 1962. The numbers indicate that the industry is poised to begin rebuilding in 2014...weather permitting.

Among the ten largest beef cow states, the cow herd was up in five states and down in five. The largest decrease in cow numbers occurred in Texas, followed by South Dakota, Montana and Kentucky and Nebraska. Beef cow numbers increased in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas and North Dakota. On net, there was a slight increase in beef cow numbers in the top ten beef cow states.

The inventory of beef replacement heifers was up 1.7 percent, a bit smaller than pre-report expectations. However, the number of beef replacement heifers as a percent of the beef cow herd, at 18.8 percent was the largest in more than 20 years, including the last cyclical expansion in the early 1990s. Among the top ten beef cow states, beef replacement heifers were up in seven states. The result is a net increase of beef replacement heifers of 4.1 percent among top ten states. Only Montana, North Dakota and Kentucky had fewer replacement heifers compared to last year while Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Dakota, Kansas and Arkansas had an increase from 2013. Oklahoma led the increase among states with 45,000 more beef replacement heifers, an increase of 16.1 percent year over year.

The 2013 U.S. calf crop was 33.93 million head, down one percent from 2012. A smaller calf crop, combined with increased heifer retention and fewer feeder cattle imports, resulted in a 2.7

percent decrease in estimated feeder cattle supplies on January 1, at 24.8 million head, down from 25.5 million head one year ago. Inventories of steers over 500 pounds were down 2.5 percent; calves under 500 pounds were down 3.7 percent and other (not for replacement) heifers were down 5.0 percent. The fact that cattle on feed was also down 5.0 percent limited the decrease in estimated feeder supplies outside of feedlots to 2.7 percent. Estimated feeder supplies as a percent of the 2013 calf crop was 72.9 percent, down from 74.2 percent last year and below the ten year average of 74.4 percent. This indicates that a smaller than average percent of feeder cattle supplies were carried over from 2013 into 2014. The number of cattle grazing small grains pasture on January 1 in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas was 1.61 million head, up 20 percent from last year and the highest total for the region since 2010. The share of estimated feeder supplies in these three states on January 1 increased to 25.7 percent, up from the 2013 low of 25.1 percent but still below the ten year average of 28.3 percent.

The January 1 cattle inventories for all cattle as well as beef cows can be the lows from which the industry rebuilds over the next several years. However, industry is quite vulnerable to drought conditions that could re-intensify this spring and postpone herd expansion once again. Market signals for expansion are strong and growing and the industry is poised to respond. We know what we want to do; we just don't know what Mother Nature is going to let us do.

Signs of Impending Calving in Cows or Heifers

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

As the spring calving season approaches, 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. Typically, in the immediate 2 weeks preceding calving, swelling of the vulva becomes 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.

Occasionally she will kick at her belly and wring her tail. Restlessness and a tendency to lie down and get up frequently are also often observed. Stage 1 begins with contraction of the longitudinal and circular muscle fibers of the uterus and ends when the cervix is fully dilated and fetal parts enter the birth canal. Uterine contractions first occur about every 15 minutes, but by the end of stage 1, they occur about every 3 minutes. As the first stage progresses, the contractions become strong enough to cause the cow to arch her back and strain slightly. In cattle, the normal duration of stage 1 is debatable. Some scientists list it as short as 2 - 6 hours, others say it is longer (4 to 24 hours) in heifers.

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 or even the

veterinarian 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, relaxations 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. More information can be found by downloading [“Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers”](#), [Oklahoma State University Extension Circular E-1006](#).

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