

# COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

## **Less cattle on feed; seasonal slaughter increases ahead**

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The April Cattle on Feed report showed that feedlot inventories as of April 1 were 10.86 million head, 99 percent of inventories one year ago. March placements were down 3.7 percent from last year; a surprise compared to the pre-report expectations for placements to be up slightly year over year. One again regional variation help to explain the differences, with placements in the Midwest and Northern Plains consistent with the expectations while placements in the Southern Plains were significantly lower, which pulled down total placements. Feedlot marketings in March were 96 percent of year ago levels, close to expectations.

USDA estimates that total cattle slaughter for the year to date is down 6.4 percent leading to a cumulative decrease in beef production of 5.8 percent so far this year. Actual slaughter data for the first 12 days of April shows that total cattle slaughter decreased year over year by 12.3 percent including a 5.8 percent decrease in steer slaughter and a 19 percent decrease in combined heifer and cow slaughter. The number of heifers on feed for April 1 was 94 percent of year ago levels. Fewer heifers are in feedlots as has been the case in the previous quarterly reports for January and last October and, unlike last year there is little indication that poor forage conditions will redirect heifers into feedlots as happened in the middle of the year in 2013.

Cattle carcass weights in April are averaging significantly heavier that last year, and have not shown the usual seasonal decrease that is typical in April and into May. This is occurring not because cattle are heavier this year, (steer dressed weights are up only slightly), but because of the sharp drop in heifer and cow slaughter. Steers are making up nearly 4 percent more of the slaughter mix compared to last year. Additionally, both heifer and cow carcass weights are down year over year.

Both feedlot marketings and cattle slaughter will seasonally increase into May and June. However, if current reductions in cow slaughter persist, the seasonal increase in cattle slaughter will be muted. At this time last year, cow slaughter was averaging about 10 percent higher than

the previous year while cow slaughter in recent weeks has been running 10-15 percent or more below year earlier levels. In 2013, cow slaughter did not drop year over year until July so extra cow slaughter contributed to the May-June slaughter peaks. It does not appear that will happen this year. Steer slaughter will continue to make up a higher percentage of the slaughter mix and this will contribute to cattle carcass weights that remain above year earlier levels. Beef production for the year to date is down 5.8 percent year over year. Annual total beef production for 2014 is on track to be down 5.5 – 6.0 percent for the entire year.

## Watching bulls closely

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

The first of May is typically a date planned for turning bulls into the breeding pasture with spring-calving adult cows. A good manager keeps an eye on his bulls during the breeding season to make sure that they are getting the cows bred. Occasionally a bull that has passed a breeding soundness exam may have difficulty serving cows in heat, especially after heavy service.

Bulls that cannot physically inseminate cows or bulls with very low libido (desire to mate) can be detected if observed closely. On rare occasions, bulls may have physical problems with the reproductive tract that prevent them from successfully breeding females. Such problems can best be detected by observing bulls while they work. **Therefore producers should (if at all possible) watch bulls breed cows during the first part of each breeding season.** If problems are apparent, the bull can be replaced while salvaging the remainder of the breeding season and next year's calf crop. Likewise a small proportion of bulls can wear out from heavy service and lose interest. These, too, will need to be replaced. The greater the number of cows allotted to each bull in the breeding pasture the more critical it is that every bull be ready to work every day of the breeding season.

Injuries to bulls **during** the breeding season are relatively common. When a bull becomes lame or incapable of breeding, because of an injury to his reproductive tract, he needs to be removed from the breeding pasture and replaced with another bull.

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