COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Cattle on feed numbers show feedlot response to current market

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The latest Cattle on Feed report puts November 1 feedlot inventories at 10.63 million head, just fractionally above the year ago total of 10.59 million head. This slight increase in feedlot inventories over last year ends a string of 26 consecutive months of monthly year over year decreases in feedlot inventories. Feedlot inventories are slightly above year ago levels despite indications that total feeder cattle supplies continue to tighten. Turning fewer cattle into larger feedlot inventories is the result of feedlot decisions about both placements and marketings.

October feedlot placements were slightly less than one percent below year ago levels. Placements were slightly larger than pre-report expectations and reflect, in part, a sharp increase in Canadian feeder cattle imports in October. Placements were up for 800+ pound animals and lower for all other weight categories. The largest year over year decrease in placements was for the traditional 700-799 pound weight category. For the last five months, which captures most of the current feedlot inventory, placements of 700-799 pounds feeders has been a smaller percentage of placements compared to last year, while all other weight categories have been a larger percentage. In other words, feedlots have placed heavy feeders (>800 pounds) to the extent available and otherwise have been placing lighter weight cattle that will stay on feed longer thereby maintaining feedlot inventories.

Feedlots have also boosted feedlot inventories by reducing the marketing rate the past few months. October marketings were 92 percent of last year, close to pre-report expectations. Feedlot marketings as a percent of cattle on feed has been at or below year ago levels all year and lower than the five year average marketing rate since February, with the exception of October. Net placements as a percent of marketings have been higher than year ago levels since

July and more sharply higher in October. The slow feedlot marketing rate is reflected in increased steer and heifer carcass weights in recent weeks, currently at record levels of 903 pounds for steers and 830 pounds for heifers, both up 26 pounds from last year. Kansas feedlot data confirms that the combination of lightweight placements and heavier marketing weights is slowing down feedlot turnover rates. Days on feed for steers and heifers were up roughly 15 days in August and 21 days in September. Feedlots have had the tacit support of packers to reduce marketing rates as packers have reduced slaughter rates in response to wholesale beef values that have not kept pace with fed cattle prices this fall. Both feedlots and packers have a short term incentive to increase carcass weights in the face of limited animal numbers. Decreasing feed costs have also supported feedlot decisions to feed lighter cattle and to feed cattle to heavier weights. It is unlikely that carcass weights can continue to increase on a year over year basis. The slower marketing rates that supported the transition to heavy carcass weights will increase to more typical marketing rates in coming months.

Evaluate udder soundness soon after calving to use as culling criteria

Glenn Selk, OSU Professor Emeritus, Oklahoma State University

Every year at "preg" checking time, ranchers evaluate cows and make decisions as which to remove from the herd. One criteria that should be examined to cull cows is udder quality. Beef cattle producers are not as likely to think about udder health and shape as are dairy producers, but this attribute affects cow productivity and should be considered. It may be easier to be accurate in your culling decisions, if you exam the udder soundness of the cows shortly after calving when they are at the peak of lactation and the udder is as large as at any time. Take time now during the peak of lactation to write down which fall-calving cows have unsound udders.

The heritability estimates of udder characteristics are variable. A study done in Brahman cattle for the heritability of udder soundness indicated that progress could be made by selecting for udder soundness. They reported that 25% of the differences in udder soundness was due to genetics. Beef Improvement Federation Guidelines have suggested that the heritability of udder soundness in beef cattle is estimated at .16 to .22 which means that some progress can be made by selecting against unsound udders.

Recent new research at Kansas State University (Bradford, 2014 KSU Cattlemen’s Day) with large numbers of Hereford data has given even greater hope that improvement in udder quality can be made. They found heritabilities of .32 for overall udder score, .31 for suspension, and .28 for teat size. Plus, genetic correlations between traits were strong (.83). This means that selection for one trait (teat size or suspension) will result in improvement in the other trait.

An evaluation system for udder soundness has been developed and used by some breeds. Teat shape and udder suspension are the two primary characteristics evaluated. Below are drawings representing unsound udders on the left and sound udders on the right.

The first two drawings are teat shape. The very "funnel" shaped teat may have been mastitic in the past. New born calves will find it difficult to nurse such a teat.

Teat Shape (above) : Note the large "funnel-shaped" teats on the cow on the left

Udder Suspension (above): Weak udder suspension leads to "pendulous" broken-down udders that also are very difficult for young calves to nurse.

Both cows on the left would be excellent candidates for culling at the next weaning of their calves. In addition,daughters of cows with poor udders should be expected to have less than desirable udders as well.