

# COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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

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Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

## **Fed cattle market purge continues**

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Fed cattle prices dropped over \$9.00/cwt last week to about \$125/cwt. Prices for pens over 80 percent Choice made up most of the volume and had a lower average price than lower grading pens of cattle. This has been the situation for several days and reflects the large supply of extremely heavy fed cattle. There are anecdotal reports of fed cattle in the Midwest with live weights up to 1900 pounds. These cattle are finally being marketed. The estimated weekly cattle slaughter last week was 574 thousand head, up fractionally from 573 thousand head one year ago. Estimated cattle carcass weights last week were 843 pounds, up 25 pounds from the same week last year. Estimated weekly beef production was up 2.6 percent year over year. The extra carcass weight is equivalent to adding over 17, 500 head to the weekly slaughter total at last year's carcass weights.

The most recent actual slaughter data (for the week ended September 12) showed record large steer carcass weights of 919 pounds, 13 pounds over last year's seasonal peak weight of 906 pounds in November. Heifer carcasses averaged 826 pounds, slightly below the record 830 pound level in November, 2014. With beef cow slaughter currently making up a larger proportion of total cow slaughter, cow carcass weights are falling; the current level of 638 pounds is down from the May peak of 660 pounds.

The boxed beef market reflects current large supplies of beef and especially Choice beef. Choice boxed beef prices have fallen faster than Select with Choice prices down \$14/cwt. this past week compared to a \$9.50/cwt. decrease in Select boxed beef prices. Choice boxed beef price ended the week at \$212.23/cwt. compared to \$209.80 for Select boxed beef. One result is an unusual counter-seasonal narrowing of the Choice-Select spread, dropping to \$2.43/cwt by the end of the week. Typically, the Choice-Select spread is around \$11/cwt. at this time of year.

It appears that the needed purge in fed cattle markets is underway. It will likely take another two or three weeks to complete the process and get feedlots current on marketings. The thoroughness of this will set the stage for fed markets for the remainder of the year. A peak in carcass weights and strong weekly slaughter totals will be indicators of successfully cleaning up this mess. It is important to remember that overall feedlot numbers are not burdensome (placements have been down for many months); it's just the supply of heavy cattle that is burdensome. Fed and boxed beef markets will be in a position for a significant recovery assuming the current purge is successful.

## **Fenceline low stress weaning**

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

Spring calving herds across the Midwest and Southwest will soon be planning to wean the calves. Some producers may wean the calves from young or thin cows during September in order to regain some body condition before winter adds to the nutrient requirements. However, many herds will wean at the more traditional times of late October to early November. Methods to reduce stress on the calves have become of great interest to producers. Therefore, weaning strategies have been studied in recent years. California researchers weaned calves with only a fence (Fenceline) separating them from their dams. These were compared to calves weaned totally separate (Separate) from dams. The Separate Calves could not see or hear their dams. Calf behaviors were monitored for five days following weaning. Fenceline calves and cows spent approximately 60% and 40% of their time, respectively within 10 feet of the fence during the first two days. During the first three days, Fenceline calves bawled and walked less, and ate and rested more, but these differences disappeared by the fourth day. All calves were managed together starting 7 days after weaning. After two weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 23 pounds more than Separate calves. This difference persisted since, after 10 weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 110 pounds (1.57 lb/day), compared to 84 pounds (1.20 lb/day) for Separate calves. There was no report of any differences in sickness, but calves that eat more during the first days after weaning should stay healthier. A Michigan State study (Buskirk, 2007) reported that fenceline-weaned calves gained more weight and had lower stress factors in the blood during the first 2 weeks after weaning than did traditionally weaned calves. The differences in weight gain however, were not retained throughout the duration of that study. An Ohio State University study indicated that fenceline calves had a lower incidence of respiratory diseases. Producers that have tried fenceline weaning will remind us that it takes good, well maintained fences and adequate water supplies for both sides of the fence. Fencing should be adequate to keep the calves and cows separate. One option is to use a five-strand barbed wire fence combined with a single strand of electric fence offset from the main fence. You may need this "hot" wire on both sides of the fence. Remember, a large number of cattle are going to be congregated in a small area for several days. Therefore water availability for both cows and calves is critical. Start the process with the cow and calf pairs in the pasture where the calves will be allowed to stay after weaning. They will be accustomed to the water sources and how to drink from them. This should reduce the risk of dehydration after weaning. Some producers have preferred to place a yearling or a non-lactating cow without a calf in the weaning pasture to lead calves to the water source.

To wean and background, even for short periods, fence-line weaning should be considered. Source: Price, et al. 2003. Fence-line contact of beef calves with their dams at weaning reduced the negative effects of separation on behavior and growth rate. *J Anim Sci* 81: 116-121.

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