



ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS

Livestock Marketing Information Center

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2000 PASTURE AND RANGE CONDITIONS: SOME BACKGROUND AND IMPACTS

Nationwide, pasture and range conditions during the spring and summer of 2000 were not as good as 1999's. And in 1999, U.S. conditions were poorer than average from August through October. By September of 2000, nearly 50 percent of the U.S. pasture and range was rated in the lowest two condition categories (poor or very poor). (Focusing on the percentage of pasture and range in the poorest categories compared to a year ago and compared to an average is a useful summary of how conditions may be impacting extensive livestock operations, see figures at the end of this article.)

In 1999, drought problems were mostly in the Southeastern states, the Northeast and parts of the Corn Belt (especially in the eastern and southern Corn Belt). The Southern Plains (Texas and Oklahoma) also had some dry conditions in 1999, mostly after August. Drought impacts forage availability and supplemental forage costs (e.g. hay), limiting management alternatives of cow-calf operations. Compared to recent years, the Southeast and Northeast regions had the most severe pasture and range problems in 1999. In terms of cattle industry impact, conditions in the Southern Plains and the Southeast influenced the national numbers in 1999.

Compared to 1999, this year's (2000) major drought impacts tended to move westward and also expanded in the Southern Plains. In terms of the U.S. beef cowherd, somewhat more cattle were likely influenced by drought in 2000 than in 1999. Pasture and range conditions in the Southeast, Corn Belt, and Northeast mostly were better than a year ago in 2000. But, conditions deteriorated critically in many areas of the Great Plains and West. Overall drought in the Southern Plains was much worse in 2000 than in 1999. In August of 2000 pasture and range conditions in the Southern Plains were better than during 1998's severe drought (two years ago), but by September of this year conditions were rated poorer than 1998's.

Severe drought usually results in above normal levels of cows culled from the impacted region's cowherd, which is often noticeable in cow slaughter data. With limited feedstuffs, cow-calf operations impacted by drought often wean calves early and sell calves and yearlings early. Even if cow-calf operations want to hold back heifer calves for their breeding herds, drought can force them to sell heifer calves.

Based on the January 1 USDA cattle inventory data, some above normal levels of cow culling and lack of heifer retention in prior years was apparent in the states grouped into the Southern Plains and the Southeast as of January 1, 2000 (Table 1) ^{1/}. In 1999, the states grouped into the Great Plains region had the best pasture and range conditions compared to normal. In fact, the Great Plains states were overall better than normal in 1999. On a regional

basis, only the Great Plains and Corn Belt states had a year-to-year increase in beef cow numbers as of January 1, 2000.

As of January 1, 2000, regions impacted by 1999's drought (except for the Northeast) tended to have held back fewer heifers for breeding herds than a year earlier (Table 2). In terms of head, the largest annual decline in heifers held for beef cow replacements was in the Southeast (-81,000 head), due to drought. The largest head increase in heifers held back was in Great Plains (+80,000 head), where good pastures prevailed in 1999.

Table 1. Beef Cows That Have Calved (1,000 Head), January 1

Region/State ^{1/}	1999	2000	% Change	Head Change
Southern Plains	7438	7328	-1.5%	-110
Corn Belt	4813	4821	0.2%	8
Southeast	8099	8030	-0.9%	-69
Great Plains	9355	9377	0.2%	22
West	3622	3586	-1.0%	-36
Northeast	328.3	316.5	-3.6%	-12
Other	90.1	87.5	-2.9%	-3
US	33745	33546	-0.6%	-199

Table 2. Heifers Over 500 Pounds Held as Beef Cow Replacements (1,000 Head), January 1

Region/State ^{1/}	1999	2000	% Change	Head Change
Southern Plains	1130	1100	-2.7%	-30
Corn Belt	722	722	0.0%	0
Southeast	1270	1189	-6.4%	-81
Great Plains	1615	1695	5.0%	80
West	690	710	2.9%	20
Northeast	90.9	99.2	9.1%	8
Other	17.4	14.6	-16.1%	-3
US	5535.3	5529.8	-0.1%	-5

Implications for 2000/01

Drought conditions continued to impact many U.S. cow-calf operations throughout the spring and summer of 2000. The economic environment generally indicated that cow-calf operations would increase the holdback of heifer calves weaned in 2000 for their beef cowherds. In fact, economic conditions in terms of calf prices and rancher profitability, assuming normal pasture conditions, improved in 2000 compared to 1999's. The question is

how much drought conditions, especially in the Plains and West, counterbalanced price signals to begin holding back heifers for the breeding herd.

LMIC forecasts for cattle slaughter in 2001 have been increased to reflect more heifers in the slaughter mix than forecast prior to August and a slight increase in cow slaughter. Forage supplies and hay prices will set the stage for heifer calf placements into feedlots yet this year (September through December). At this time, forecasts still incorporate a year-to-year decline in heifer slaughter for 2001.

^{1/} Regional classifications used are as follows:

Southern Plains: OK and TX

Corn Belt Region: IL, IN, IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI

Southeast Region: AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV

Great Plains Region: CO, KS, MT, NE, ND, SD, WY

West Region: AZ, CA, ID, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA

Northeast Region: CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT

Note: 7 pasture and range condition charts were attached to the mailed version of this Analysis and Comments. Those charts were posted to the LMIC World Wide Web site.