

Where Have All the Beef Cows Gone?

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The feast or famine scenario is never far away for those in the beef business. Ironically, the same scenario is evident in the crop business.

Generally, crop producers are very market focused, entwining farm program concerns, management options and individual will to come up with an annual approach to production. The triad of producer inputs generally produces a crop output that has a home, not always at the desired price, but nevertheless a home.

Although individual memories don't always go back as far as one would like, difficult years, such as this one, tend to get stuck in the mind and are easier to recall than the good years. Years like this tend to defeat the best laid plans. Many acres of what was originally a marketable crop suddenly become forage.

Crop acres converted to forage acres is not a new problem and neither is the problem of finding a machine to harvest the forage. Forage using machines are typically called ruminants such as cows, sheep or goats. As many realize, these four-legged forage machines are not always readily available.

For some producers, years like this result in alternative marketing opportunities for cash cereal grains, but the demand is lower than expected this year. The principle reason is a lack of livestock to feed.

The North Dakota Agricultural Statistics Service shows that beef operations and the number of cows has declined. The last year of the last millennium (1999) showed North Dakota with 980,000 beef cows. The number declined to start the new millennium as 970,000 cows were on North Dakota farms and ranches in 2000.

The year 2001 showed an increase to 1,004,000 beef cows and then increased to 1,008,000 in 2002. The trend went south the last two years with a total of 973,000 cows in 2003 and 937,000 cows in 2004, almost a four percent decline from a year ago.

Over the long haul, these numbers are between the

highs and lows. The highest cow inventory was 1,242,000 beef cows in 1975. Since this high, nineteen years were more than the current inventory and nine years were less. The lowest total came in 1989 when only 832,000 beef cows were in the inventory.

In terms of beef operations, the trend is still negative. In 1999, there were 12,700 beef operators, but the total fell to 11,000 by 2003. In comparison, total farm numbers were listed as 31,000 in 1999 and 30,300 in 2003. Beef operations decreased by over 13 percent, while total farm numbers decreased by only 2.3 percent.

If long term numbers mean anything, North Dakota producers annually try to maintain a balance between crop and livestock production. If years like this are on the horizon (which they most likely are) and the short term trends continue, finding forage harvest machines is only going to get more difficult.

Cows are important to the state and region. A long list of reasons could be made, but the list does not change the end result. Areas where soil profiles and topography make crop production difficult are dedicated to beef cow production with little opportunity to change.

Cattle are needed. Crop production areas, although very viable most years, need a neighbor's cows when the conditions create a relatively immobile forage crop.

This year will be a memory making year. Let us hope a positive outcome will be a strengthening of the crop and livestock balance.

May you find all your USAIP ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0212.

Beef Cow Inventory

January 1, 1999 - 2004

Year	Beef Operations	Beef Cows
1999	12,700	980,000
2000	12,300	970,000
2001	12,000	1,004,000
2002	11,500	1,008,000
2003	11,000	973,000
2004	NA	937,000