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BeefTalk: An Increase in Beef Cows Requires Cropland



Cattle producers will need to find a way to use cropland if much cow herd expansion is going to happen.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Current industry thoughts would indicate that the beef cow herd is expanding, but the question is, "Where?"

As cattle numbers expand, one needs to ponder where and then how. Ultimately, cattle need land, and regardless of where one goes, land is a precious commodity. Competition is tough, and crop production continues to dominate agriculture. So the question that often needs to be discussed is, "Just where is the forage base to expand cattle?"

Images

2007 and 2012 Agricultural Statistics		
	2007	2012
North Dakota Farms	31,970	30,961
Acres Farmed	39,674,586	39,262,613
Acres of Principal Crops	27,527,190	27,147,240
Acres of Permanent Pasture or Rangeland	10,418,885	10,247,184

In 2012, 69 percent of North Dakota's land was in cropland and 26 percent was in permanent pasture or rangeland.

Land use is constant. An increase in beef cows requires cropland in North Dakota.

www.egensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1_State_Level/North_Dakota/st08_1_008_008.pdf

2007 and 2012
Agricultural
Statistics - An
increase in beef
cows requires
cropland in North
Dakota.

columns

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Examples of the use of UAV direct visuals in precision agriculture include evaluating planting success, crop scouting, and locating and counting livestock. [FULL STORY](#)

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: An Increase in Beef Cows Requires Cropland](#) (2017-02-23)

Cattle producers will need to find a way to use cropland if much cow herd expansion is going to happen. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Have You Enjoyed an Egg Lately?](#) (2017-02-23)

Eggs are among nature's most nutritious foods. [FULL STORY](#)

use of releases

The news media and others may use these news releases in their entirety. If the

Although the excitement of the high value of cattle and crops has diminished, the lingering effects of high crop prices still have the potential to pull land resources from cattle. A cattle number review shows cyclical highs and lows, generally price-driven. Through time, 10 years generally was noted as the cycle length, but the exact number of years certainly has varied.

Regardless, as cattle numbers go up and down, what happens to the land base? What happens as crop production expands and utilizes land that previously was used for cattle? History will tell us, but the real question for the beef industry is current land use and the opportunity to graze on available land at a reasonable cost.

The stocking capacity, the number of cow-calf pairs various land eco-types can support, does not cycle and essentially is set for the country as a whole. Thus, land use is the driving factor, driven by how flexible producers are in converting from one land use to another land use.

The beef business does not stand alone. In some areas, beef cattle may be the primary agricultural enterprise, but beef production is a subset of agriculture. A big-picture look of agriculture is necessary.

The 2012 Census of Agriculture

( <https://www.agcensus.usda.gov>) reported

North Dakota's land area at 44,160,640 acres. The

2007 Census of Agriculture reported 31,970 farms in North Dakota were farming 39,674,586 acres. Five years later, the 2012 report indicated 30,961 farms in North Dakota were farming 39,262,613 acres.

That's not a large difference. In terms of principal crops, the 2007 report noted 27,527,180 acres of cropland (22,035,717 acres harvested) and the 2012 report noted 27,147,240 acres of cropland (23,469,816 acres harvested), an increase in harvested acres but still not large differences.

Interestingly, in 2007, 812,533 acres of cropland were reported as being used for grazing. In 2012, 321,936 acres of cropland were reported as being used for grazing.

Another interesting note: Included in the total crop acres was cover crops. In 2007, 3,549,898 acres were idled for cover crops or other soil improvement. In 2012, cover crops and soil health accounted for 2,665,385 acres. In 2007, 3,434,036 acres were enrolled in a conservation program. In 2012, only 2,163,579 acres were enrolled.

These data suggest land use is fairly constant in the big picture, even though the acreage numbers certainly are not constant. Individual producers will change land use, but weather is the big determinant of what actual success the producer will have.

However, the livestock industry does exist and

utilizes permanent pasture and rangeland: 10,418,885 acres in 2007 and 10,247,184 acres in 2012. The inventory of cows and heifers that calved was 956,502 in 2007 and 899,558 in 2012. Like total cropland, the changes appear as fewer acres. The success of those acres is tied up in long-term practices.

Perhaps the spikes in increased crop prices were an incentive for less forage and livestock production, but the real point is to simply acknowledge current land use. Again, these numbers do not indicate a lot of real differences, and one certainly would question just how much the cow-calf industry can expand without a significant change in producer thoughts regarding long-term land use.

A change in land use, particularly from crop production to cattle, may take a minimum of two to three years, and maybe longer, to take advantage of known production practices that enhance forage and pasture production by cattle. Changing from cattle to crop production can occur in one season.

So where are we at today, at least in North Dakota? In 2012, 69.1 percent of North Dakota's land was in cropland, 26.1 percent was in permanent pasture or rangeland, 4.1 percent was in farmsteads and .7 percent was in woodlands. These figures are readily available from the Census of Agriculture for any state; just click on the state-level data.

Let's look at the bottom line. The 2012 North Dakota inventory of cows and heifers that calved was 899,558 head. With 10,247,184 acres as pasture, that is 11.4 acres per cow-calf pair. The 2016 inventory is even higher, thus lowering the available pasture acres per cow-calf pair.

Acres per cow-calf pair vary, depending on location. However, cattle producers are going to have to find a way to use cropland if much expansion for cows is going to happen. The increase in beef cows requires cropland.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

NDSU Agriculture Communication - Feb. 23, 2017

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Attachments



[PDF - 2007 and 2012 Agricultural Statistics - An increase in beef cows requires](#)

[cropland in North Dakota.](#) 

(NDSU_Extension_Service_BeefTalk_022317.pdf -
19.20 Kb)



[EPS - 2007 and 2012 Agricultural](#)

[Statistics - An increase in beef cows requires
cropland in North Dakota.](#)

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227.41 Kb)

