

MARKET ADVISOR

by Tim Petry, North Dakota State University Extension Service

Beef Cow Numbers in U.S. and Canada

Beef cattle production in Canada is similar to the U.S. Northern Plains as would be expected. Cattle feeding in the Northern Plains is centered in Nebraska and Alberta. Angus cattle are popular in Canada just like in the United States.

A number of loyal readers of the *Angus Journal* reside in Canada. I thought it might be interesting to compare beef cattle numbers between the two countries.

The numbers

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) and the Animal Products Section, Statistics Canada (StatsCan) report state, province, and total cattle inventory numbers by class as of Jan. 1 each year. Each March NASS issues a combined *United States and Canadian Cattle and Sheep* report with total cattle numbers by class.

On Jan. 1, 2019, there were 31.77 million beef cows in the United States compared to 3.66 million head in Canada. In spite of record-high feeder cattle prices, beef cow numbers in both countries declined from 2011 to 2014. Droughts in major cattle-producing regions of both countries were largely responsible for that. The U.S. Southern Plains were especially affected by that.

The total five-year increase in U.S. beef cows since the last cyclical low recorded on Jan. 1, 2014, was 2,680,300 head; an increase of more than 9%. During the same time

Canadian beef cow numbers declined 167,100 head or about 4.4%. The U.S. had the largest number of beef cows on Jan. 1, 2019, since 2009. In contrast, Canada had their lowest number since 1991.

Canadian cattle and beef market conditions, weather and related forage and feed availability and exchange rates were likely contributors to the decline. Furthermore, increasing cow size and larger steer and heifer carcass weights actually resulted in increasing Canadian beef production from 2015 to 2019.

Breaking records

After reaching a cyclical low in 2015, beef production in the United States also increased to a near-record level this year.

The Canadian provinces with the most beef cows on Jan. 1, 2019, include Alberta: 1.514 million; Saskatchewan: 1.1 million; Manitoba: 411,000; Ontario: 242,000; and British Columbia: 208,000. Little, if any, beef cow herd expansion is expected in either country.

Expansion in the United States has already caused record-high beef production. That, along with record-high pork and chicken production

will be a headwind for prices. In July NASS reported about 4% fewer beef replacement heifers and 8% more heifers on feed for harvest. U.S. pasture and range conditions are the best in many years, so drought-forced liquidation is not expected. The U.S. beef cow herd may stabilize for the next couple years.

Pasture and range conditions in Canada's prairie region (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba), the major beef cattle producing area, have been challenging with some areas experiencing multi-year drought. Much of the area suffered with severe drought early in the 2019 grazing season, but July precipitation in parts of the area may have caused temporary improvement. Below-average pasture conditions and hay yields have been reported. Canadian beef replacement heifers on Jan. 1 were down 1.4% from 2018.

The beef cow herd may decline again when numbers are reported in January 2020. [A](#)

Editor's note: Tim Petry is a livestock marketing economist with the North Dakota State University Extension Service.