

COW/CALF CORNER

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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

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The new year brings with it several changes in ongoing market dynamics, some new opportunities, and some new risks and continuing challenges for cattle and beef markets. The watch list of beef and cattle market factors includes the typical suspects including trade; domestic demand; supply dynamics; competing meats; and feed and input markets. However, changes in several factors towards the end of 2019 suggest a somewhat different tone for markets in 2020.

The international market situation is somewhat clearer now after trade disruptions and uncertainty strangled many agricultural markets for much of the past two years. The likely completion of the revised NAFTA agreement (USMCA) in the coming weeks removes a significant source of uncertainty for agricultural markets. A new bilateral trade agreement with Japan will restore a more competitive position for beef and should stop the erosion of U.S. market share, which became very apparent in that important beef export market in the second half of 2019. Though details are currently lacking, the anticipated Phase 1 trade agreement with China is expected to significantly improve the trade situation for numerous agricultural markets and may allow beef to begin building a meaningful market position in the rapidly growing beef market in China.

African Swine Fever will undoubtedly be a major factor affecting protein markets globally in 2020. The disease has caused a current pork deficit in China and other Asian markets and is found in numerous other countries in Europe and Africa. The exact magnitude of impacts are uncertain and there is no indication that the disease will be effectively controlled any time soon. The reduction in global meat production will support all protein markets and is expected to boost U.S. exports of pork, poultry and beef in 2020.

The beef supply situation is expected to be more supportive in the coming year with cyclical herd expansion over and beef production peaking. The current status of the cattle cycle will be confirmed in the Cattle inventory report to be released the end of January. In general, cattle numbers are expected to be down slightly year over year. Beef production is expected to peak fractionally higher in 2020 with heavier carcass weights offsetting a slight decline in cattle slaughter. Carcass weights finished 2019 above year earlier levels and will bear watching in the coming year.

Total U.S. meat production will once again push to new record levels in 2020 with beef, pork and poultry all at or near record levels. Trade improvements will be critical to provide a strong international component of meat demand in addition to domestic demand. Overall, improvements in net meat trade (more exports and fewer imports) are expected to offset a significant portion of increased meat production and limit the growth in domestic meat consumption.

There are risks that could challenge beef markets in the coming year. Global trade tensions, though reduced, will continue to add uncertainty to markets. Geopolitical tensions, the U.S. presidential election, energy prices and currency values will all contribute to market volatility and could negatively affect input costs and consumer spending. The U.S. economy is projected to slow a bit more year over year in 2020 and continues to be vulnerable as sluggish growth, which is riding on low unemployment and strong consumer spending, masks underlying weakness in manufacturing and investment. In summary, 2020 offers better opportunities for cattle and beef markets but producers are advised to keep an eye on a host of macro-economic and global factors, as well as evolving cattle market conditions, and proceed with caution.

The 3 stages of parturition

Glenn Selk, Oklahoma State University Emeritus Extension Animal Scientist

As the calendar turns to a new year, the spring calving season approaches. Many spring calving herds will begin the calving season around the first of February, if not before. An increased understanding of the “calving” or parturition process is helpful. The more we understand about the physiology of the process, the more likely we are to make sound decisions about providing assistance. Parturition or “calving” is generally considered to occur in three stages.

Stage 1: The first stage of parturition is dilation of the cervix. The normal cervix is tightly closed right up until the cervical plug is completely dissolved. In stage 1, cervical dilation begins some 2 to 24 hours before the completion of parturition (2 to 6 hours would be most common). During this time the “progesterone block” is no longer present and the uterine muscles are becoming more sensitive to all factors that increase the rate and strength of contractions. At the beginning, the contractile forces primarily influence the relaxation of the cervix but uterine muscular activity is still rather quiet. Stage 1 is likely to go completely unnoticed, but there may be some behavioral differences such as isolation or discomfort. At the end of stage one, there may be some behavioral changes such as elevation of the tail, switching of the tail and increased mucous discharge. Also relaxation (softening) of the pelvic ligaments

near the pinbones may become visually evident, giving a “sunken” appearance on each side of the tailhead. **Checking for complete cervical dilation is important before forced extraction (“pulling”) of the calf is attempted.**

Stage 2: The second stage of parturition is defined as the delivery of the newborn. It begins with the entrance of the membranes and fetus into the pelvic canal and ends with the completed birth of the calf. So the second stage is the one in which we really are interested. This is where we find all of the action. Clinically, and from a practical aspect we would define the beginning of stage 2 as the appearance of membranes or water bag at the vulva. The traditional texts, fact sheets, magazines, and other publications that we read state that stage 2 in cattle lasts from 2 to 5 hours. Data from Oklahoma State University and the USDA experiment station at Miles City, Montana, would indicate that stage two is MUCH shorter. In these studies, assistance was given if stage two progressed more than two hours after the appearance of water bag at the vulva. The interesting thing about the data was that the heifers calving unassisted, did so in about one hour after the initiation of stage two, and mature cows calved within an average of 22 minutes of the initiation of stage two. Those that took longer needed assistance. These and other data would indicate that normal stage two of parturition would be redefined as approximately 60 minutes for heifers and 30 minutes for adult cows. In heifers, not only is the pelvic opening smaller, but also the soft tissue has never been expanded. Older cows have had deliveries before and birth should go quite rapidly unless there is some abnormality such as a very large calf, backwards calf, leg back or twins. If the cow or heifer is making good progress with each strain, allow her to continue on her own. Know your limitations. Seek professional veterinary help soon if you encounter a problem that cannot be solved easily in minutes.

Stage 3: The third stage of parturition is the shedding of the placenta or fetal membranes. In cattle this normally occurs in less than 8 to 12 hours. The membranes are considered retained if after 12 hours they have not been shed. Years ago it was considered necessary to remove the membranes by manually “unbuttoning” the attachments. Research has shown that manual removal can be detrimental to uterine health and future conception rates. Administration of antibiotics usually will guard against infection and the placenta will slough out in 4 to 7 days. **Contact your veterinarian for the proper management of retained placenta.**

An important ingredient for your calving season preparation is the [Oklahoma State University Extension Circular E-1006: Calving Time Management for Beef Cows and Heifers](#). Cow calf producers will want to download this free circular and read it before the first calf is born this spring.

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