What does the USDA-NASS Cattle on Feed Report Tell us About Cattle Production?

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The following is a summary of the webinar “Understanding USDA-NASS Cattle Reports” given on April 29, 2021, as part of the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Farm and Ranch Management team’s weekly webinar series. The webinar can be accessed at [https://farm.unl.edu/webinars](https://farm.unl.edu/webinars) and an accompanying podcast can be accessed at [https://farm.unl.edu/nebraska-farmcast](https://farm.unl.edu/nebraska-farmcast). Both are provided free to the public.

USDA-NASS Overview  
The USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts hundreds of surveys every year and prepares reports covering virtually every aspect of U.S. agriculture. Production and supplies of food and fiber, prices paid and received by farmers, farm labor and wages, farm finances, chemical use, and changes in the demographics of U.S. producers are only a few examples. NASS is committed to providing timely, accurate, and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture. Most surveys conducted by NASS are voluntary and all individual reports are kept confidential.

NASS Cattle on Feed Program  
The NASS Cattle on Feed Program is a monthly survey of feedlots that have a feeding capacity of 1,000 or more head. This survey is conducted in 16 states and covers 98% of the U.S. cattle on feed 1,000+ feedlot inventory. One unique aspect about Cattle on Feed is that all feedlots with 1,000 or more head capacity are included. It is a census while most other NASS surveys are a sample of known producers. Feedlots in the program provide information on inventory, placements, marketing, and disappearance. Cattle on feed are defined as steers and heifers being fed a ration of grain, silage, hay, and/or a protein supplement for the slaughter market that are expected to produce a carcass that will grade select or better. It excludes cattle being “backgrounded only” for later sale as feeders or later placement in another feedlot. Cattle on feed also excludes bulls and cows as they will not meet the grading requirement.

Cattle Inventory Program  
Cattle inventory reports are released in January and July. The January report provides estimates of total inventory, beef cows, milk cows, bulls, replacement heifers, other steers and heifers, and the number of calves born in the previous year by state and the U.S. In July, estimates are for the U.S. only. The number of calves born is a projection of the current year calf crop. The Cattle Inventory Program is a sampled survey where NASS draws a sample from all known cattle producers. Each state will have specific sampling rules and definitions that target operations based on size group and type of operation – beef cattle, milk cows, and cattle on feed capacity. The larger operations are sampled more heavily to make sure there is
adequate coverage of total inventory. In January, the sample is nearly 35,000 and in July the sample is over 19,000.

**Putting the Cattle on Feed Data To Use**
The United States Government spends a considerable amount of money each year collecting voluntary data. This data is accessible through online data portals free of charge to all individuals. For example, historical data for major agencies can be found in the following locations: 1) most USDA-NASS reports can be found at [https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/](https://quickstats.nass.usda.gov/), 2) mandatory prices submitted to USDA-AMS can be found at [https://mpr.datamart.ams.usda.gov/](https://mpr.datamart.ams.usda.gov/) and, 3) most historical data of other USDA-AMS reports can be found at [https://mymarketnews.ams.usda.gov/public_data](https://mymarketnews.ams.usda.gov/public_data). Most producers can usually find the data they need to make informed decisions on one of these databases. While the historical raw data is available, it can be challenging to use the data to create either tables or figures to support a given management decision.

The FARM team at UNL recognizes this potential barrier and has worked to create a variety of web-based applications. These applications automatically download the data from the USDA agency and allow the producer to make a variety of custom historical, spatial, and seasonal graphs/maps. These are available, free of charge, to the general public. Currently, there is an application that allows visualization of USDA-NASS’s Cattle on Feed and Cattle Inventory Report. These and other applications that visualize USDA livestock reports can be accessed at [https://farm.unl.edu/decision-tool-pages/livestock](https://farm.unl.edu/decision-tool-pages/livestock).

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q:** What types of cattle are counted by the Cattle on Feed report?
**A:** Cattle on feed are defined as steers and heifers being fed a ration of grain, silage, hay, and/or a protein supplement for slaughter market that are expected to produce a carcass that will grade select or better. Cattle on feed also excludes bulls and cows as they will not meet the grading requirement.

**Q:** How does NASS monitor and adjust the Cattle on Feed report for backgrounding lots?
**A:** Many of these “backgrounded only” lots meet part of USDA’s definition to be counted as a feedlot since they are feeding steers and heifers a certain ration. They do not meet the requirement for selling cattle for the slaughter market. Thus, cattle being “backgrounded only” for later sale as feeders or later placement in another feedlot are excluded from the sample. USDA-NASS periodically checks in with these operations to make sure they are still a backgrounding lot.

**Q:** How did USDA-NASS adjust to the data disruptions during COVID-19?
**A:** USDA-NASS was unable to conduct in-person interviews during COVID-19. However, interviewers were still able to collect information through the phone. Overall, the response rate to the Cattle on Feed and Cattle Inventory report was unaffected.

**Q:** Why does USDA-NASS not publish a state breakout number for IA-MN in the Cattle on Feed report?
**A:** While this is an increasingly popular location to feed cattle, historically this type of information has not been asked for by industry. States can switch from being published to unpublished as inventory numbers change and remain constant over time. USDA-NASS strives to include and publish state breakout information that the industry desires and that is consistent with the US Census on Agriculture inventory levels. Currently, the states reported for placement weights (NE, KS, TX, CO) represent about 76% of all cattle on feed in the US. IA and MN inventories are published at the state level.
Q: There was industry concern that many cattle that remained on feed after meat processing plants shut down were missed. How did USDA-NASS handle this situation?
A: Cattle on feed numbers are collected at the state level and then aggregated up by reporting region. These estimates are then sent to headquarters in Washington D.C. where the reports are combined and compared with historical slaughter, exports, and imports. Of this historical slaughter is the most important factor. During COVID-19, the process was the same with the exception being that there were fewer cattle slaughter cattle to verify and confirm inventory numbers.

Q: What is the difference between the estimates for cattle on a feed from the Cattle Inventory report and the Cattle on Feed report?
A: The primary difference is that the Cattle Inventory report captures “all cattle on feed” regardless of feedlot size. Cattle on Feed primarily captures lots that have a capacity greater than 1,000 head.

Q: Why does the July Cattle Inventory report only capture national numbers and calf crop numbers not released broken down by state?
A: Before 1982, the July Cattle Report did have state-level data for the 34 major states. The report changed to U.S. estimates in 1982. I do not know why the change was made. However, the July report does provide valuable information on inventory levels and calf crop even if the numbers are only U.S. level.

Cite this work: