

Cattle Ranching on the Move Amid Drought

ROXANA HEGEMAN, Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. (AP) — The severe drought that scorched pastures across the Southern Plains last summer helped shrink the nation's herd to its smallest size in more than six decades and encouraged the movement of animals to lush fields in the northern and western parts of the U.S., a new report shows.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service reported Friday that the U.S. inventory of cattle and calves totaled 89.3 million animals as of Jan. 1. That was down by 1.5 million cattle, or 2 percent, compared with this time a year ago.

The agency says this is the lowest January cattle inventory since 1952. It does two counts per year, in January and July. The January report had been anxiously awaited because it shows the impact of the drought as it spread across the nation last summer and provides a state-by-state breakdown documenting the shift of animals north.

Texas, the nation's largest cattle producing state, saw its herd shrink 5 percent to 11.3 million head amid a multi-year drought. Nebraska's herd shrunk 2 percent to 6.3 million animals as the drought spread north this summer. In Kansas, another hard hit state, the number of cattle shrunk 4 percent to 5.8 million animals as ranchers sold off animals as pastures dried up and the price of hay skyrocketed.

By contrast, North Dakota ranchers expanded their herds by 6 percent to nearly 1.8 million head, while South Dakota's cattle numbers grew 5 percent to 3.8 million head. Montana, Idaho and Washington also boosted the size of their herds.

Glenn Tonsor, an Extension livestock specialist at Kansas State University, said the shift away from drought-stricken areas only makes sense.

"It doesn't surprise me that the southern Plains continue to have a pullback in the number of cows, and it doesn't surprise me that the Northern Plains has been increasing," he said.

The growth in the north didn't make up for losses elsewhere, however, and the repercussions are being felt in the meatpacking industry. Cargill Beef, one of the nation's largest processors, announced in January that it will idle its slaughterhouse in Plainview, Texas, and lay off all 2,000 workers because there's less work.

For consumers, fewer cows will mean less beef and higher prices down the line, particularly as demand from overseas increases, Tonsor said.

As "the United States and global population continues to increase ... There is less beef around for them to argue over, bid for," he said.

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Among those already feeling the pain is Kansas rancher Nathan Pike, who has sold off 600 cows over the past couple of years. With just 130 pregnant cows left, he considered trying to buy back a few animals this winter in the hopes of better weather next spring, but cows cost significant more now than when he sold his animals because there are fewer left.

"We are gambling," said Pike, 80. "We are just trying to figure out a way to make a living."

In New Mexico, cattle numbers are down for the third straight year and the number of ranchers looking to sell off their herds and get out of the business continues to grow. The overall herd is down to 1.3 million animals, the fewest since 1991.

"It's trite, but it is the perfect storm," said Caren Cowan, executive director of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association. "We have no rain, there's no feed readily available, what is available costs too much and the cost of transportation has increased. We're just in a bad place."

Despite the hardships many ranchers are facing, Cowan said the selling off of herds by longtime ranching families could open an opportunity for younger ranchers who can't afford to buy land to work with those who still own property.

"We continue to look for the silver lining," she said.

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Associated Press writer Susan Montoya contributed to this report from Albuquerque.

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