

Experts Predict Good 1980 Beef Supply

Circa 1980, the pessimist said, supermarkets will advertise beef as "the early bird special"—meaning, if you don't get it early, you might not get it at all.

Draw a big "X" through that prediction. The U.S. cattle industry won't let it happen.

Beef will not become a scarce commodity from the way things are going.

According to a nationwide opinion poll of 295 experts in the livestock raising industry, cattlemen will rise to the challenge of upping beef output by a third between now and 1980.

That's an increase needed to meet the projections for consumption. The USDA's Economic Research Service foresees total beef use as reaching 29 billion pounds in 1980, or enough to allow consumption to climb to around 127 pounds per person from this year's 114.

Experts' credentials

The panel of experts were selected for their ability to help shape the future of cattle raising in their States. Holding positions of leadership or decisionmaking, the 295 experts included State and area extension specialists in beef, milk, forage production, and farm management and livestock marketing, directors of State beef cattle associations; prominent cattle producers; and persons from financial institutions.

ERS asked the panel members, who remained anonymous to one another, to assess the future potential of U.S. beef production. Specifically, each expert was to estimate the relative importance of certain factors and the rate of adoption of production practices that would affect the number of cows in his State and the productivity per cow.

The panel gave cattle prices a high ranking among factors influencing cow numbers. The consensus was that the price of a choice steer calf (450-500 pounds) would have to exceed \$35 per 100 pounds to give strong encouragement to expansion of the beef cow herd. Moreover, the experts generally expected to see prices top that level. Measures to reduce the farm beef price below the necessary level could seriously threaten the industry's ability to meet the expected demand.

Grand tally

All factors considered, beef cow numbers nationwide were estimated at 46 million head in

1980—9 million more than in 1970. A herd of this size could supply nearly 23 billion pounds of beef. Adding production from the dairy herd (estimated at somewhat over 4 billion pounds) and net imports (almost 2 billion pounds) gives the total beef supply in 1980 of 29 billion pounds.

Why so much attention to beef cows in this study? As explained in the ERS report which summarizes the opinion poll, the U.S. beef cattle industry has neared the end of a major development phase.

During 1950-70, beef production doubled. Cattlemen did this by (1) switching from dairy cattle to beef cattle as consumption of dairy products dropped, and (2) by feeding grain to a larger share of the calf crop to bring animals up to 1,000-pound slaughter weights, rather than slaughtering them as calves.

End of an era

Now nearly all calves are being placed on feed, so increased grain feeding offers limited potential for adding to the beef supply. And though the dairy-to-beef shifts may continue, this also is approaching the completion stage for the most part.

Thus, the major addition to the beef supply during the seventies has to come from expanding the number of beef cows.

The experts expected increases in cow numbers in all regions and all States, except in the Northeast for which no projections were made because beef production is of minor importance.

There will, however, be great differences among States and regions in both relative and absolute growth in beef numbers. Generally, the humid regions—where crop-livestock farms predominate—will show the largest expansion relative to other areas. Most of the expansion in beef cow numbers in regions where specialized ranching is common will also occur under mixed crop-livestock systems.

Here's a brief rundown of the regional prospects as viewed by the experts:

Cows in the Corn Belt

This region will enlarge its beef cow inventory 37 percent during 1970-80 to 6.7 million, with four-fifths of the increase in Missouri and Iowa. In Illinois and Indiana, expansion will be small due to the high proportion of good land and intensive row crop farming. Overall increases in the Corn Belt

will reflect further enlargement of farms, favorable prices for feeder calves and a shortage of feeder cattle in the region, also relatively low grain prices and strong potential for forage production. Beef cow enterprise should not be encumbered by the waste management problems associated with large cattle feeding and hog operations.

National pacesetter

The Lake States are expected to have the sharpest increase among major cattle regions—49 percent, bringing the herd to 1.3 million in 1980. Expansion will occur mainly in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Reasons for the increase are much the same as in the Corn Belt, with the additional incentives of a good potential for grass legume forages and a continuing shift out of dairy production.

The Southeast's inventory will swell 29 percent of 11.8 million head for a total gain of 2.6 million. This represents about 30 percent of the increase expected nationally, though the Southeast's expansion won't match that of the 1950-70 period. Kentucky's share of the regional total will rise 2 percent between 1970 and 1980, while Florida's drops 1 percent. Factors favoring the buildup: reduced acreages of cotton and tobacco, more specialization in farming, farm consolidation, increasingly scarce and costly farm labor, technological improvements in forage production and use, and a steady trend toward part-time farming.

Plains Gains.

The Northern Plains is expected to add roughly 2 million beef cows, up 33 percent, for a total of 8.5 million in 1980. The four States in this region will each gain by approximately the same percentage. Most of the expansion is marked for the eastern half and third of the Northern Plains. Cattle raising will be encouraged by improved output and utilization of forage crops, and—though the panel had dissenting opinions—a shift from grain to forage production may also play an important role.

The Southwest's estimate puts the inventory at 9.7 million head in 1980—8 percent more than 10 years earlier. The experts project a slower growth rate than in the eastern U.S., partly because of the large initial base of herd size and partly because of limited potential for greater

production. Oklahoma will come in for a higher percentage increase than either Arizona, New Mexico, or Texas. But Texas will top the others in terms of sheer numerical increases. Expected gains in this region can be chalked up to better forage production and expanded cattle raising in general, especially along the Gulf Coast and southeastern Texas. In range areas, there will be a shift from sheep to goat enterprises, but in other areas, overgrazing and transfer of grazing lands to alternative uses will reduce the number of beef cows.

Mountain region v. U.S.

The Mountain States' projection indicates nearly the same rate of increase in cow numbers as for the Nation as a whole—21 percent during the 1970's, putting the total at 5.7 million in 1980. Little change is anticipated in Utah and Nevada because of the arid climate and

full utilization of existing forages. In other States, the increases will come partly from technological advances in forage production on rangelands. As elsewhere in the U.S., most of the grains will be in the crop farming sections.

The Pacific region, will add about 0.2 million beef cows by 1980 (10 percent), with modest increases in all States. Competing uses of land will contain expansion of cow herds in the cropping areas, and the rangelands have the same limitations as other western States.

Altogether, these regional changes point to a national increase in beef cows of 24 percent for the 48 States between 1970 and 1980. The growth rate foreseen by the experts is substantial any way you look at it. On this point, the experts reached a meeting of the minds.

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