

Pregnant Feedlot Heifers

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Why are feeder heifers less valuable than steers?

According to information in the January 2002 Drovers magazine in December 2001 cattle in Georgia were bringing:

| <u>Weight</u> | <u>Steers, Med and Large 1</u> | <u>Heifers, Med and Large 1</u> | <u>Difference</u> |
|---------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| 400-500 | 88.00-112.00 | 75.00-94.00 | 13.00-18.00 |
| 500-600 | 80.00-95.00 | 70.00-84.00 | 10.00-11.00 |
| 600-700 | 70.00-85.00 | 64.00-77.00 | 6.00-8.00 |

The 400-700 pounds average price difference between steers and heifers was 8.00 per 100 pounds. Some of this price differential is because steers feed out more efficiently and have a heavier carcass. **A part of the price difference is the fact that some of the heifers sold will be pregnant.**

Pregnant heifers in a feedlot are recognized as a liability by cattle feeders. If a heifer enters a feedlot pregnant there is very little chance she will feed out for a profit. Economic losses to the cattle feeder are from death loss at calving, increased treatment costs, additional labor to check and calve-out pregnant heifers, and reduced value when sold. The incidence of pregnant heifers going into a feedlot varies seasonally and is higher in the fall and winter months. The incidence also varies with the geographic source of the heifers. **Regions of the country that have large numbers of producers with extended calving seasons or no bull removal tend to have higher rates of pregnant heifers going into feedlots.** When cattle buyers bid on heifers from these locations, **they discount all heifers because of the probability that some of the heifers will be pregnant.** The average percent of pregnant yearling heifers entering feedlots is 3–15%.

When a cattle feeder receives pregnant heifers, they have several management options. 1) They could feed them out normally and handle the problems as they occur. This results in waste from lower dressing percentage, higher treatment cost, and higher mortality due to dystocias and calving complications. On average, there is a net economic loss of \$115.00 for feeding a pregnant heifer with no management to control pregnancy. 2) The feeder can monitor the heifers, sort out the pregnant heifers and sell them when they get close. The value of a fat pregnant heifer is reduced and this will require increased labor. 3) Feedlot operators could purchase only guaranteed open heifers. The availability of these heifers is negligible and therefore, makes this impractical. 4) Feedlot producers can pregnancy check all heifers and abort or sell those pregnant. This requires increased labor and medicine costs. No product will abort all pregnant heifers and there will be a small percentage of bred heifers to manage. On average, the economic loss for pregnancy testing and aborting heifers is \$53.00 and the economic loss for pregnancy testing and selling bred heifers is \$50.00. **None of the alternatives is profitable, so cattle buyers just pay less for heifers since some will be pregnant.**

What will improve this situation? **The critical point to get a heifer bred is exposure to a fertile bull. This most commonly happens in an extended calving season** with eight month or older heifers still running with the bull. If the calving season

is 60 – 90 days and the calves are weaned 4 – 5 months before the beginning of the next calving cycle then heifers running with the bull would be less than seven months old. If it is not possible to remove commercial heifers from the bull then spaying heifers would be an alternative. **If we are to develop a positive reputation for providing our customers with high quality open heifers that will feed out profitably, we have to address the problem of marketing pregnant heifers.**