

## The Beef Cattle Industry in the Coastal Plain Region of Oklahoma

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The Coastal Plain Region of Oklahoma is not yet a great beef cattle raising region though the cattle industry in the region is growing. Traveling from the Red River to Atoka County on U.S. Highway 69-75, or from west to east on U.S. Highway 70 from Love County to the Arkansas border, one observes few farms with commercial row crops. Most of the acreage that is not in timber or lying fallow in the Soil Bank is in permanent pasture. Twenty years ago much more of the land was in cotton, corn, and peanuts. This is not to indicate that there are no commercial row crops being grown in the region, but it is obvious from a study of the region that more and more of the land is being converted to pasture.

The Coastal Plain Region, located in southeastern Oklahoma, has a boundary at the Red River on the south and at the Ouachita and Arbuckle Mountains on the north. East to west, the region extends from the Arkansas border to about the western boundary of Love County. This encompasses an area about 40 miles long from north to south and about 180 miles wide from east to west, or approximately 7,000 square miles. The region is the northwestern edge of the larger Gulf Coastal Plain that extends southward approximately 375 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

Traditionally the great western range area of the United States has been thought of as the center of this country's beef industry. This has been true in the past and still is, to a certain extent, as the western range country has few other sources of income of comparable importance. It should be pointed out, however, that these western range lands have for some time been stocked at or near capacity, and that in some instances they have been seriously overstocked. It is not likely that the number of beef cattle will increase substantially in this semiarid region unless new ways are found to enlarge the carrying capacity of the pastures. The increasing population of the United States is creating a steadily growing demand for beef, and this growing demand will have to be met largely by farm beef herds in the more humid parts of the country or by cattle grown on irrigated land.

More and more farmers in the Coastal Plain Region of southeastern Oklahoma are turning to the raising of beef cattle. These farmers and ranchers are attempting to help meet this greater domestic demand for beef and by so doing they hope to show financial gains for themselves through their efforts. These efforts in the early 1960's are yielding at least modest success.

Much of the land in the Coastal Plain Region of Oklahoma, even some that is only moderately rolling, has been damaged by erosion during the many years of row cropping. The resultant infertility of the land has made it no longer profitable, in many places, to continue planting the traditional row crops. The average value of farm land and farm buildings on the land is low. The farmers have begun to turn their fields into pastures as a means of getting at least some return for their efforts. During good crop years the value of crops sold still exceeds that of livestock products, but in years of drought the opposite is often true.

National surpluses of several of the major commercial crops of the region—cotton, corn, and peanuts—have caused the federal government to encourage or require farmers to restrict crop acreages, convert cropland into pasture land, or put some of their fields in the Soil Bank. Such financial inducements as partial government support for plowing and sprigging the land with Bermuda grass have helped considerably in the conversion

to an animal economy. Financial assistance is also given by the federal government for improving wooded and eroded lands in order to convert them into pasture land.

In the Coastal Plain Region, there are more than four thousand farms and ranches occupying an area of approximately one million acres. The number of beef animals on this land was sufficient in 1959 to account for the sale of approximately 75,000 head of live cattle. Some of the ranchers in the region are old-timers who have been raising cattle on the same place for several decades, while others are newcomers who have bought sizable properties in the region in recent years. Several of the longtime residents interviewed have recently expanded their farming and ranching operations.

The size of farms and ranches varies greatly within the region. The term "ranch" is locally applied only to those larger properties on which there is specialization in livestock. The average rancher interviewed had approximately 500 acres with about 80 head of cattle.

Most of the ranchers seem to be in the process of buying their land under long-term loans. Some reported that they had acquired land through inheritance. Land in the region varies in price from about \$30 to \$150 per acre. The average price of improved land as a whole is approximately \$100 per acre, while noncommercial wooded land is usually worth less than \$50 per acre. Large operators and investors sometimes buy land and convert it into pasture. Wooded land can be cleared for \$25 to \$50 per acre, while badly eroded land can be filled, sloped, and sprigged in Bermuda grasses for about the same amount. Such a high investment in land improvement is financially beyond the means of most farmers and ranchers in the area. It should be noted that out-of-state investors are buying some of the larger tracts undergoing such improvement. Considerable land in the region is leased for ranching purposes. Of the ranchers interviewed, about one-fifth are leasing additional land to supplement their own acreage. The cost of leasing pasture land varies, but the rate is most often based on the number of cattle pastured on the leased land, with \$1.50 to \$2.00 per head per month as the commonly reported rate of payment.

The ranchers of the region are fairly evenly divided in their choice of breeds of beef cattle. My field study indicates that a little more than half of the ranchers prefer Hereford cattle, with Aberdeen Angus as a close second.

The increase in income from livestock has been achieved, to an important degree, through more scientific procedures in ranching. Some ranchers, however, are utilizing modern practices to improve their ranching productivity much more effectively than others. A number of them have improved the quality and performance of their cattle herd by utilizing breeding practices recommended by Oklahoma State University. Most of the ranchers have developed at least some good permanent pastures by using fertilizers and recommended grasses. Pastures are also being used more efficiently. On virtually all of the ranches, improved watering facilities have been constructed and are being maintained. Losses due to disease and infections are prevented on most ranches by using both internal and external control measures. Those ranchers who operate their ranches more efficiently by using modern facilities and sound feeding practices obviously seem the most prosperous. As beef cattle numbers have increased in the Coastal Plain Region, bank deposits have increased accordingly.

All of the ranchers of the region feel that the beef cattle program has a promising future. Some anticipated the 1963-64 decline in beef prices, but even these ranchers expect that the market will recover and continue on to greater heights.

In conclusion it can be stated that beef cattle numbers in the Coastal

Plain Region have increased at a rapid rate during the past two decades, and the trend is expected to continue in the future. Some of the factors that tend to influence this trend are: (1) a large percentage of the land is more suited to pasturage and is better utilized by beef cattle than by any other agricultural endeavor; (2) less labor is required to raise beef than is needed for other livestock and crop enterprises; (3) summer droughts have tended to plague farmers of the region, and in cattle production there is less risk of loss from weather damage; (4) the climate is favorable for a long grazing season and for the development of improved permanent pastures; (5) it is easier to borrow money for cattle operations than for farming operations because the market for beef is more demanding and steady. At least some return for money invested is practically assured.

It would appear that the Coastal Plain Region of Oklahoma has at last found an industry that is well adapted to the area and that promises a better and brighter future than the row-crop farming of the past.

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