

Two primary forces are likely to keep the U.S. dressed cattle weights below a year earlier for the balance of this calendar year. First, is the weather, second is the influence of cattle slaughter mix. In fact, average carcass weight may track closer to the 2012-16 average than 2017's, which would be down 12 to 15 pounds year-over-year. So, the annual high may have occurred.

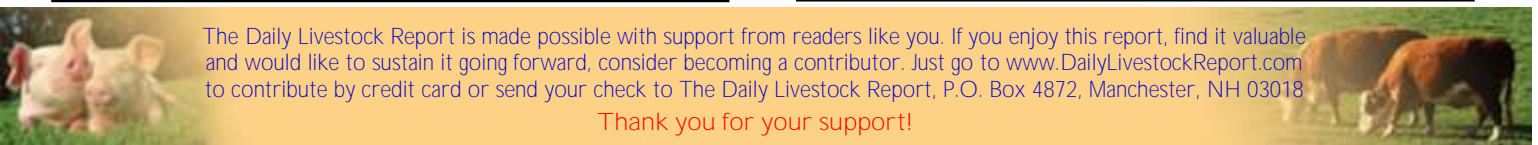
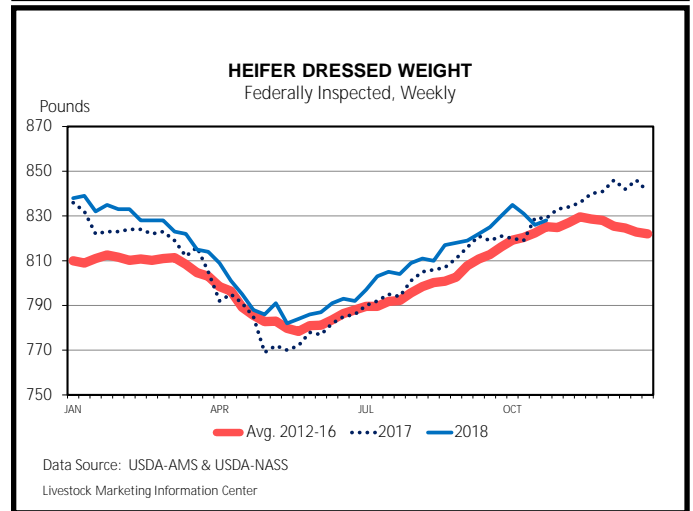
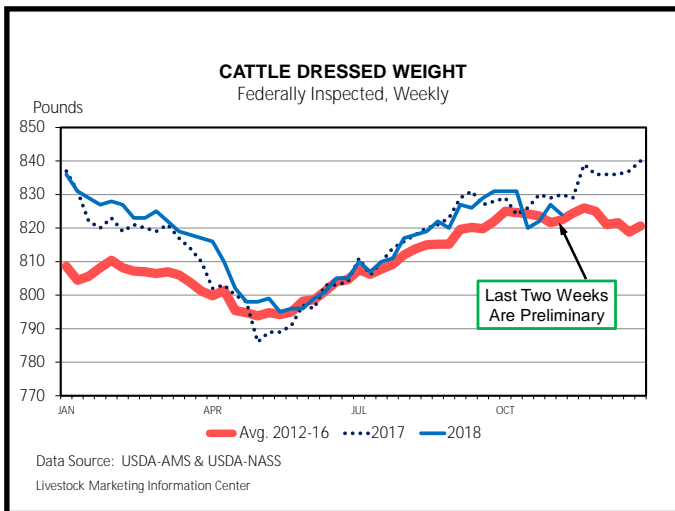
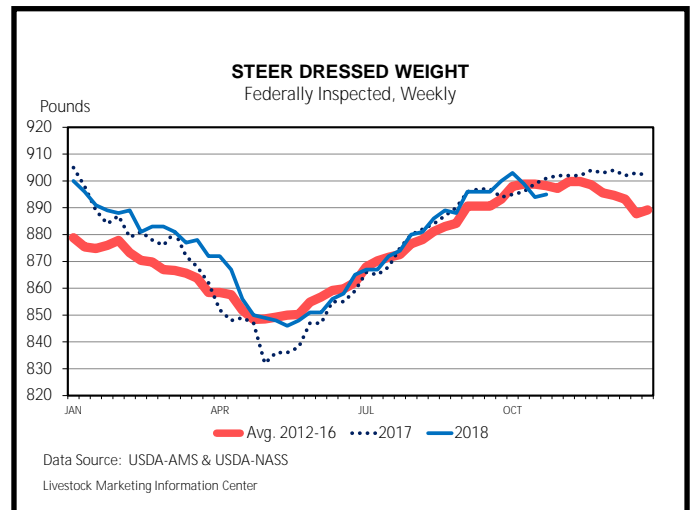
This past weekend, frigid temperatures and snow descended upon the Southern Plains cattle feeding areas. Much of the Texas Panhandle reported six inches of snow. This fall, muddy feedlot conditions have been common in the Southern Plains and Midwestern states. Muddy conditions cause several problems, including impeded animal daily gain and at times ratchet-back of slaughter weights at the impacted feedlots.

Four types of animals comprise the cattle harvest: steers, heifers, cows (both beef and dairy), and bulls. The largest category is steers. This year, the trend has been proportionally fewer steers being slaughtered and more heifers and cows. For the last week of data (week ending October 27th), compared to a year earlier, the steer proportion of slaughter declined by 1.6%, and cow slaughter increased by 1.6%. Although the year-over-year changes in slaughter mix have not been huge, they do influence average dressed weight. Harvest weights are much heavier for steers than they are for cows and heifers. For example, the most recent weekly data had the average steer carcass weight of 895-pounds, compared to the cow weight at 624-pounds. Heifer carcasses are heavier cows; in the latest week the heifers averaged 67-pounds below steers.

Proportionally more cows are expected to be in the slaughter mix for the remainder of this year.

Cattle slaughter and dressed weight data reported by USDA for the last two weeks shown in the first graphic are preliminary. For steers and heifers, the weekly data (second and third graphics), the latest data are "actuals" for the week ending October 27th.

If weather conditions this winter are more severe than usual, steer and heifer carcass weights can drop year-over-year, limiting beef production. Winter storms can disrupt cattle and meat transportation, making cattle and wholesale market prices volatile.



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