



Ohio County Farm & Home News

**Cooperative
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REVIEWING 2023 & LOOKING AHEAD TO 2024

The following article is from Dr. Kenny Burdine, Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist at U.K., taking a look back at 2023 beef cow numbers and looking at trends for 2024.

The U.S. cowherd reached a 60-year low in 2023. Some of this decline is driven by efficiency in the beef industry. We produce more with less. As such, it would be misleading to compare today to 60 years ago. It still does speak to how significant the recent declines in beef cow numbers have been. For a more recent comparison, the 2023 cowherd is slightly smaller than in 2014, a year fondly remembered by most in the cattle business. Expansion resulting from those 2014 / 2015 price levels continued until 2019, and the cowherd has been getting smaller since then. The first figure in this article shows beef cow inventories from 1940 to 2023.



2020 was set to be the high-water mark for U.S. beef production. While production increased slightly in 2020, COVID backlogs pushed some of that production into 2021. Then, widespread drought led to significant increases in female slaughter in 2022, which resulted in another year-over-year increase. That brought us to 2023, which ended up being the first year-over-year decrease in beef production in eight years.

Data on cow slaughter and the share of heifers on feed both imply another year of declining inventories. Nationally, there is no doubt this cowherd got even smaller during 2023. Weather and hay supply has been an issue in some areas, but we also think you have to

consider the impact that input costs and high interest rates have on the cost of expanding one's cowherd. At some point, expansion will occur, but farmers are not at that point yet. All this is to say that the 2024 calf crop will be smaller than the 2023 calf crop, and the feeder cattle supply will continue to shrink. Certainly, numerous things impact markets, but we expect calf prices to be stronger in the spring of 2024 than in the summer of 2023.

It is hard to see beef cow numbers increasing until 2025 at the earliest. So, cow-calf operators should get relatively strong calf prices for a few years. Some may choose to expand during this time, but we always like to point out that there are other ways to capitalize on a solid calf market. Investing in facilities, genetics, grazing systems, etc. has the potential to lower costs and/or increase efficiency. At the same time, paying down debt and/or building up working capital can put a farm in a better financial position for the future. The point is that each cow-calf operation should take a long-term view when they make decisions and know that what makes sense for one operation may not make sense for another.

BEEF MANAGEMENT TIPS

→→ Spring Calving Herd

- Be sure that weaned heifer calves are on a feeding program that will enable them to be at about 65% of their mature weight before the start of the breeding season. Rations should be balanced to achieve gains sufficient to get

heifers from their current weight to that “target” weight.

- Body condition is important, plan an adequate winter program for cows to be at least body condition score 5 (carrying enough flesh to cover the ribs) before the calving and breeding season. This will help them to breed early in the spring. Thin cows should be fed to regain body condition prior to winter. Don't let cows lose weight/condition. Supplementation will most likely be needed. Find low-cost supplemental feeds to meet the nutrient needs of cattle.
- Divide the herd into groups for winter feeding
 - weaned heifer calves
 - first-calf heifers, second-calvers and thin mature cows
 - the remainder of the dry cows which are in good body condition
 - herd sires
- Begin feeding the lowest quality forage to dry cows which are in good condition during early winter and save the best hay for calving time or for weaned calves.
- Order and number ear tags for next year's calf crop this winter. It is also a good time to catch up on freeze branding and replacing lost ear tags.

→→ Fall Calving Herd

- Get breeding supplies together, if using estrous synchronization and/or A.I.
- Have Breeding Soundness Evaluation (BSE) performed on bulls (even if you used them this spring).
- The fall breeding season starts. Breeding can best be accomplished on stockpiled fescue pasture; otherwise, cows with calves should be fed 25-30 pounds of good quality hay or its equivalent. Supplement with grain, if needed, and minimize hay waste. **DON'T ALLOW THESE COWS TO LOSE BODY CONDITION PRIOR TO OR DURING THE BREEDING SEASON.** It is easy to wait too long to start winter feeding. Don't do it unless you have stockpiled fescue.
- Nutrition level of cows during the first 30 days after conception is critical. Pay attention.
- Observe performance of bulls during breeding season. Watch cows for return to estrus, if you see several in heat, try to determine the cause and consider changing bulls.

→→ General

- Complete soil testing pasture to check for fertility and pH. **FREE** soil testing available thru the Ohio Co. Extension Office
- Consider putting down geotextile fabric and covering with gravel in feeding areas before you begin hay feeding to minimize waste of expensive hay. Or, perhaps, construct concrete feeding pads for winter feeding areas.
- Monitor body condition and increase feed, if needed, for all classes of cattle.



- Jan.2-4 - Ky Fruit & Vegetable Growers Conference; Sloan Convention Center, Bowling Green
- Jan. 11-12 - KY Cattlemen's Association Convention; Central Bank Center, Lexington
- Jan. 17 – Intensive Soybean Management Workshop; Sloan Convention Center, Bowling Green
- Jan. 18 – Commodity Conference Meeting; Sloan Convention Center; Bowling Green
- Feb. 1 – U.K. Wheat Meeting; James E. Bruce Convention Center; Hopkinsville
- Feb. 8 – Ky Crop Health Conference; National Corvette Museum; Bowling Green
- Feb. 8 – Ky Alfalfa & Stored Forage Conference; Warren Co. Extension Office; Bowling Green
- Feb. 20-22 – Ky Turf & Landscape Management Short Course; Hardin Co. Extension Center

Wishing everyone a joyous holidays' with family and friends, as well as, a prosperous New Year!!!