

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Counting Cows

I once saw a cartoon poking fun of cowboys who seemed to be perpetually counting cows. Speaking only for myself, it does seem like it is a daily activity of getting a head count to make sure that everyone has come up to eat, no one is sick or this time of year – all the babies are still there and nursing. Not too long ago, another “cow count” came out, that being the US beef cowherd inventory. Dr. Darrell Peel, Oklahoma State University Extension Livestock Marketing Specialist, has done an analysis of why we continue to see a decline in the momma cow numbers. His work serves as the basis for today.

The January 1, 2026, beef cow inventory was 27.607 million head, down 1.0 percent from one year ago. The beef cow herd has decreased a total of 4.033 million head since the cyclical peak in 2019, a decrease of 12.7 percent. The debate continues as to whether this is the new cyclical low, much of which depends on what the weather does. There was a noted slight increase in beef replacement heifers in the latest data giving hope to the momentum for heifer retention and eventual herd rebuilding.

The logical question becomes, where has liquidation taken place? A proportionally larger share of herd liquidation has occurred in the heart of beef cow production regions of the United States. In 2019, 13 states in the middle of the country accounted for 64.6 percent of the total herd, by 2026 the share had dropped to 63.1 percent. The herd inventory change in these 13 states in the past seven years totaled 3.0 million head, 74.3 percent of the total herd decrease. Kansas specifically had the largest percentage drop of 25.1 percent, losing 384,000 head and dropping from 6th to 7th with Montana surpassing in state rankings.

The top five ranking states; Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Missouri, South Dakota, remained in order during this timeframe, but lost nearly 1.796 million head. Widespread drought from 2021-2025 prompted much of the beef cow herd liquidation in major beef cow states. Unfortunately, continuing drought conditions and drought threats are likely to keep cattle producers cautious and hesitant to aggressively restock in much of this region and in other areas of the country.

Changes in crop production and land use are also a factor in some areas. From 2019 to 2025, corn and soybean planted acreage in the U.S. increased by 8.6 percent, an increase of 14.2 million acres. Simultaneously, hay acreage is in decline, reducing the potential for forage resources. Increased crop production may limit herd rebuilding in the Midwest and eastern regions of Great Plains states including Kansas, Nebraska and North Dakota, along with South Dakota. This is a factor I consider to be an obstacle to cowherd expansion in Northeast Kansas if crop acres aren't available for livestock integration.

On the heifer side of the equation, all heifers 500 pounds and over as of January 1, 2026 totaled 18.0 million head, 1 percent below the 18.1 million head on January 1, 2025. Beef replacement heifers came in at 4.71 million head, were up 1 percent from a year ago, which might be a signal that heifer retention has begun. Kansas specifically reported the same number of beef replacement heifers in 2026 as 2025 at 190,000 head, so we may not be seeing the cow herd yet expanding in Kansas.

For those wishing to review the complete report, it can be found on the USDA website: [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Surveys/Guide to NASS Surveys/Cattle Inventory/](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Surveys/Guide%20to%20NASS%20Surveys/Cattle%20Inventory/) The long story short is that ongoing weather conditions and longer-term structural adjustments in agriculture suggest that beef cow herd rebuilding will continue to be a slow process.