



Stabilizing & Growing the Herd: What We Know & Don't Know

For this update, I wanted to provide some “quick facts” concerning inventory, prices, and differences in this cycle. Both producers and consumers are navigating decision-making in uncharted territory as we enter year 12 of the current cattle cycle with the tightest cattle supplies since 1961.

2026 National Herd (all cattle & calves)

- 86.2 million head, 0.4% below 2025
 - has declined by 8.5 million head since 2019
- Dairy Herd increased by 187,500 head
 - largest since 1994

2026 National Beef Cow Herd

- 27.6 million head, 1% below 2025
 - smaller by 1.3 million head since 2014 low
 - has declined by 4 million head since 2019
- Replacement heifers increased by 0.9%
 - ❖ **sign of stabilization, not heavy retention**

2026 Florida Herd (all cattle & calves)

- 1.58 million head, 1.3% higher than 2025
 - increase of 20,000 head
- Dairy Herd increased by 3.1%
 - increase of 3,000 head

2026 Florida Beef Herd (#9 in beef cow numbers)

- 872,000 head, 0.8% higher than 2025
 - also increased by 3,000 head in 2024
 - has declined by 47,000 head since 2021 peak
 - smaller by 33,000 head since 2016 low
- Replacement Heifers unchanged at 115,000 head
 - ❖ **Florida appears to be stabilizing & thinking more seriously about expansion.**

Tight supplies + strong consumer demand = high cattle & beef prices. Protein is popular. Consumers are showing they are willing to pay for a high-quality beef product knowing it is a prime source of protein. Of all beef graded in 2025, 12% was graded prime compared to 10.8% in 2024. The all-fresh beef retail average price in 2025 was \$8.84/lb. Tight supplies are certainly a driver of high prices, but consumer demand will continue to be the key driver. As of February 20th, prices for 500-600-pound steers in Florida were 44% higher (\$164/cwt) than February 2025. Eventually, expansion will gradually result in more breeding stock, more calves, more beef, and lower cattle and beef prices.

The emphasis is on *gradually*. Expansion this time around is expected to be much slower primarily due to higher inputs and hesitancy associated with how quickly the market turned in 2015. We know that tight supplies and consumer demand will drive future cow-calf profitability. However, we do not know if or when consumer demand will decline as beef prices reach a certain level, the effects of ongoing trade deals and re-opening the border, weather effects on forage availability, and many other unknowns. We are no longer comparing apples to apples (now to 2014-2015), but rather apples to oranges which makes risk management strategies a non-negotiable in this market.

Scan the QR code for the more detailed Annual Florida Cattle Market Report discussing inventory, prices, beef production, and more heading into 2026.



Questions, contact Hannah at h.baker@ufl.edu

See this update and other helpful resources online at <https://rrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/about/directory/staff/hannah-baker/>

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