

The Start of 2026: Drought, Freezing Temps, & New Cow Numbers

by Hannah Baker

Heading into 2026, Florida agriculture is having to handle its fair share of weather challenges. Recent freezing temperatures over several consecutive nights, pro-longed drought from 2025, and uncertainty of how this weather will affect crops and forages will all play a vital role in decision making in 2026. For cattle producers, decision-making on how and when to rebuild the beef cow herd remains complex, especially considering these recent weather conditions. The latest cattle inventory report was released by USDA on January 30th, highlighting where the cattle herd stands nationally and on the state level.

As of January 1, 2026, U.S. cattle and calf inventory has declined by less than 1% (0.4%) to 86.15 million head,

with beef cow numbers down 1% to 27.6 million head. The decline in beef cow numbers is somewhat surprising given the sharp drop in beef cow slaughter and culling seen in 2025. The number of heifers held as beef replacements increased by 0.89% (41,700 head) with heifers expected to calve increasing by 1.4% (42,000 head).

In **Florida, total cattle inventory** increased by 20,000 head (1.3%) to **1.58 million head; beef cow numbers** increased by 7,000 head (0.8%) to **872,000 head; and dairy cow numbers** increased by 3,000 head (3.1%) to **98,000 head**. Following a 3,000-head increase in 2025, Florida beef producers appear to be moving toward herd stabilization.

Florida now ranks 9th in beef cow numbers compared to 10th in 2025 (Table 1). Heifers held as beef replacements remain unchanged at 115,000 head. Pro-longed statewide drought conditions, recent freezing temperatures, and high calf prices will certainly influence decisions regarding more significant heifer retention in 2026.

Additionally, harsh winter conditions in the west could contribute to furthering tight supplies this year as freezing temperatures are not kind to newborn calves. Making sure nutritional requirements are being met, especially energy requirements, to

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Click on the images below to check us out on:

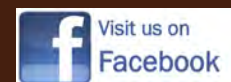


Figure 2. Drought Conditions in Florida. U.S. Drought Monitor, February 24, 2026

help cattle maintain condition and regulate body temperature is also no small feat that comes with additional expenses (feed, labor, etc.). In Florida and across the country, a lot of decisions will need to be made in the coming months regarding expansion efforts. For example, diversified producers who have crops that will be affected by the winter weather may look to selling weaned heifers they planned to retain this year to compensate for crop loss. If this drought continues, cattle producers may decide the forage availability just is not there this year to try and restock. For heifers that were retained this past fall, how do current weather conditions affect their growth, development, and breeding success?

While there is uncertainty going into 2026, one certainty is that the outlook for cow-calf

producers currently remains strong for 2026 and into 2027. A smaller herd coupled with strong consumer demand for beef means prices for both cattle and beef are expected to continue rising. Prices may not rise as fast as they did in the first half of 2025, but they are expected to rise none-the-less. Prices for 500-545-pound Florida steer calves as of January 30th reached \$488/cwt, 78% higher than the same week in 2024. For a more detailed summary and outlook of the cattle industry for 2026, please see the 2026 Annual Report here <https://rrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/about/directory/staff/hannah-baker/>

Learn more -
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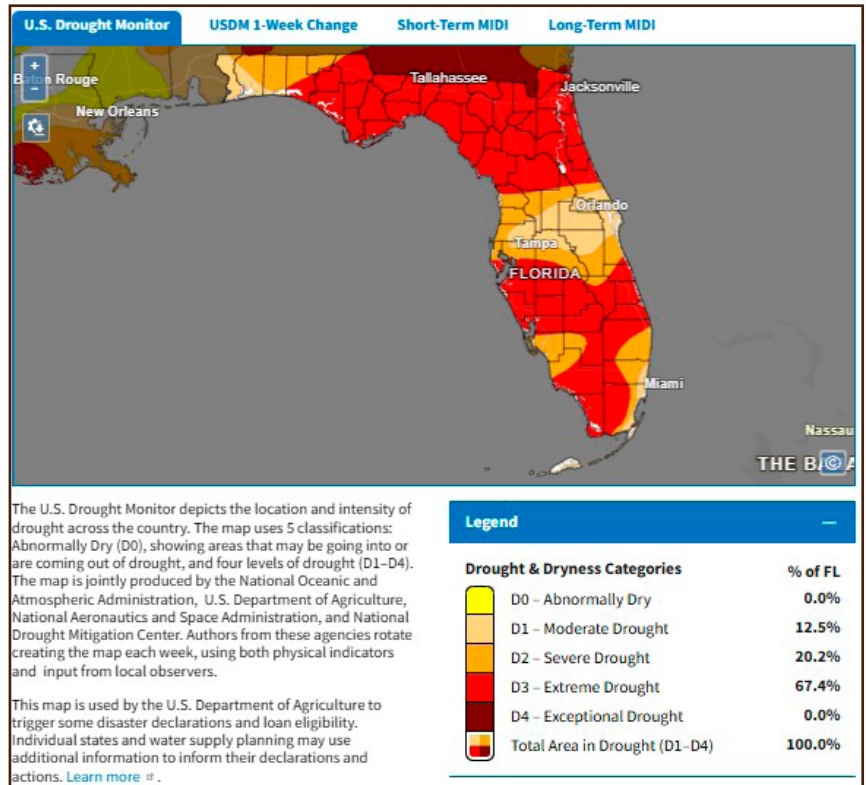
Table 1. Top 10 States in Terms of Beef Cow Numbers in 2026

Rank	State	Number of Beef Cows in 2026 (1,000 head)	% Change from 2025
1	TX	4,045	-1%
2	OK	1,966	0%
3	MO	1,806	-3%
4	NE	1,560	-1%
5	SD	1,450	0%
6	MT	1,232	-2%
7	KS	1,145	-7%
8	ND	891	2%
9	FL	872	1%
10	KY	862	-1%

Center News

Notable Weather for Nov. 20, 2025 to Feb. 28, 2026 (data collected from [FAWN](#))

- Total rainfall for the time period: 4.01"
- Greatest amount of rainfall in a given day: 0.93" on Dec. 7, 2025
- Max temperature (at 2'): 89.87 degrees F, on Feb. 20, 2026
- Extreme low temparture (at 2'): 21.54 degrees F on Feb. 2, 2026
- Since 11/20/25 Ona has experience 13 nights with freezing temperatures -- date with lowest temperature: 12/31, 28; 1/1, 29; 1/16, 26; 1/19, 31; 1/27, 31; 1/28, 27; 1/29, 26; 2/1, 24; 2/2, 22; 2/3, 23; 2/6, 30; 2/24, 30; 2/25, 25.
- Vist the [U.S. Drought Monitor](#) website for current drought conditions.



Center News (continued)

The UF/IFAS Range Cattle REC 2025 Climatological Report is Now Available –

This report is released annually by Dr. Brent Sellers. View and print the 2025 and previous reports from our website at <https://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/news-and-publications/publications/climatological-reports/>

Big news: The previous record low annual rainfall total (32.02 inches set in 2000) was broken with the annual rainfall for 2025 totaling 31.08 inches, 21.62 inches lower than the 84-year average of 52.70 inches (see table 2 from the report at right).

Table 2. Summary of rainfall by months. Range Cattle REC, 2025.

Month	1942 to 2025		84-year average†	2025	Difference from 84-year average
	Maximum / month	Minimum / month		Total	
January	8.45	0.03	2.13	1.49	- 0.64
February	9.59	0.02	2.41	1.88	- 0.53
March	12.34	0.01	2.81	0.65	- 2.16
April	11.91	0.00	2.44	0.22	- 2.22
May	13.55	0.00	3.75	3.33	- 0.42
June	18.99	2.79	8.53	7.90	- 0.63
July	19.74	1.87	8.18	6.82	- 1.36
August	16.10	3.13	8.45	4.61	- 3.84
September	28.74	0.89	7.37	2.79	- 4.58
October	11.23	0.00	2.85	0.36	- 2.49
November	11.22	0.07	1.85	0.09	- 1.76
December	8.61	0.07	1.93	0.94	- 0.99
Year total			52.70	31.08	- 21.62

*Inches x 2.54 = cm.
 † Since rainfall records began in July 1942, means for January to June are 83-year means.

Giving Day - Thank you! -

On Feb. 19, 2026, The Gator Nation® rose together with pride and purpose. Thousands of alumni, students, faculty, staff, friends and families rallied for the University of Florida during our eighth annual Stand Up & Holler: Gator Nation Giving Day. Their collective generosity is powering impact across UF – accelerating discovery, elevating the student experience and turning bold ideas into real-world

solutions.

A big THANK YOU to everyone who participated in [Giving Day, STAND UP & HOLLER!](#)

If you missed Giving Day 2026, you can still make a difference at any time by supporting the UF programs and initiatives that inspire you, including the reserch, Extension, and teaching activities at the UF/IFAS Range Cattle REC. Give at: <https://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/about/give-to-rcrec/>

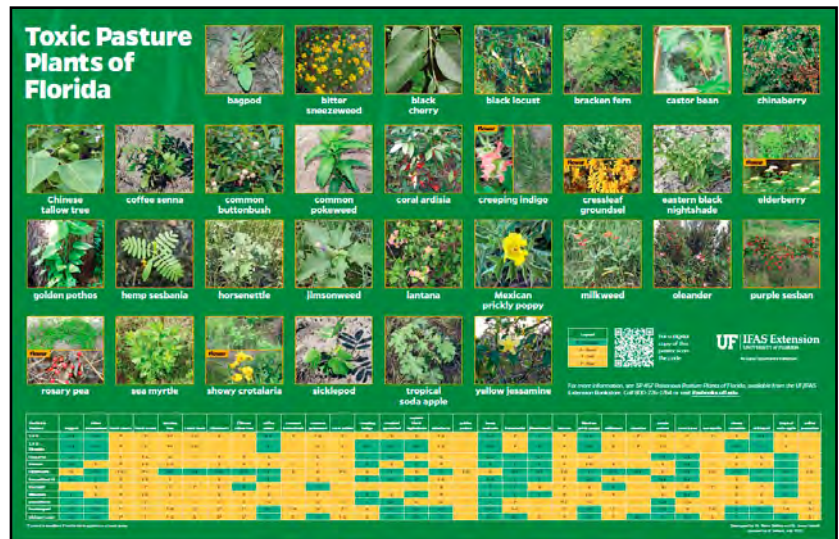


Watch out for toxic pasture plants! -

View this poster on our website, [click here](#) or...



It will soon be available from the UF/IFAS Bookstore. See this and other resources available through them at <https://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/>



Faculty News

Wauchula Kiwanis Club
Presentation - Dec. 2



Pictured above are Charley Matheny, Roy Petteway, and Dr. Ellington. Photo provided by The Herald Advocate.

Dr. Ellington presented about coyote ecology and behavior in both rural and urban landscapes. He also shared preliminary findings from the Rangeland Wildlife Ecology Lab's coyote research in Florida.

On Dec. 11, Hannah Baker presented 'The Cost of Adopting BQA Practices (or not adopting)' at the SFBFP – Cattle Management for Women event. [Click here](#) to visit Hannah's webpage to access this presentation.

Welcome back - Dr. John Arthington. After providing 6 years of leadership to the UF Animal Science Department, in January 2026, Dr. Arthington officially returned to the RCREC to continue his research and extension work as a specialist in beef cattle nutrition and management. In his absence, Dr. Jason "Jay" Ferrell is serving as interim chair of the Department of Animal Sciences, as a new chair is being sought.

Dr. Ferrell is also the chair of the agronomy department and leads the Center for Aquatic Invasive Plants (CAIP).

On Sunday, January 25, Drs. Brent Sellers and Hance Ellington attended a tour hosted by Ducks Unlimited at the UF/IFAS DeLuca Preserve. Attendees listened to the history of the preserve, as well as previous, current and future research, and about plans to restore wetland habitats. While the University of Florida Foundation owns the property, Ducks Unlimited holds the conservation easement.



On Feb. 11, Dr. Brent Sellers spoke at the Northwest Florida Beef

Cattle Conference. He discussed the herbicide toolbox for pasture and weed management. Photo by Doug Mayo.



On February 17, the UF/IFAS South Florida Beef Forage Program held their 2025-2026 UF Elite Herdsman Academy final class and graduation ceremony at the Center. Graduates enjoyed a morning tour of the Center and a visit to some of its field sites to learn about the research being done with Dr. Brent Sellers, Dr. John Arthington, and PhD Candidate, Vinicius Izquierdo. After returning to the Grazinglands Education Building, they chatted a little with Hannah Baker about the cattle market before the graduation ceremony and lunch.



From left to right are Lindsey Crum, Ally Bastien, Lisa Carlton, Ross Perry, Grace Ward, Robert Thompson, Caroline Bartha-Blaschik, and Sonja Crawford.

Staff News

2025 Annual Awards & Recognitions Ceremony



The children enjoyed the tree.

On December 5, faculty, staff, students, family, and friends gathered in the Grazinglands Education Building for this annual time of celebration.

Two staff members celebrated service anniversaries in 2025, Jeff Steele with 25 years (below left) and Austin Bateman with 20 years (below right).

Austin Bateman with 20 years (below right).



In 2025, new 'Outstanding Achievement Awards' were presented. The 'Spirit Award' recognizes individuals known for their kindness, positivity, and spirit of camaraderie. This year's staff winners were Tom Fussell and Lauria Gause (below at left), and student winners were Conner Crawford and Chadwade Anderson (at right).



The 'Resilience Award' recognizes individuals who have overcome significant personal, academic, or professional challenges while continuing to contribute meaningfully to their work. This year's staff winners were Julie Warren and Lauria Gause (below at left), and student winners were Seyed M. B. Seighalani and Joao Lazarin (at right).



The 'Guardian Award' recognizes individuals who consistently go above and beyond their role, often working behind the scenes to ensure the center's daily success. This year's staff winner was Andrea Dunlap (below left), and the student winner was Vinicius Izquierdo (at right).



staff winner was Andrea Dunlap (below left), and the student winner was Joao Lazarin (at right).



The 'Excellence Award' recognizes individuals who embody UF/IFAS RCREC's core values and mission, fostering innovation, teamwork, and excellence in agricultural research and education. This year's



Winning cornhole team: Rocky Parks and Cody Wingo.

Staff News (continued)

Community Engagement

On January 15, Mike Trevino, Andrea Dunlap, and Khalil Meliane volunteered as judges at the Hardee High School science fair.



Mike, Andrea, and Khalil.

On February 4, Tenzy Mncube enjoyed serving as a judge at the Regional Science Fair held at South Florida State College in Avon Park. (no photo available)

On February 12, Andrea Dunlap joined Tammy Watts and Laina Durrance volunteering as judges for the Citrus Sales Marketing Competition at the Hardee County Fair in Wauchula.



Andrea, Tammy, and Laina.

Student News

Graduate



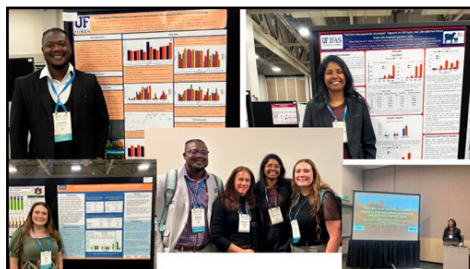
In the fall, Dr. Seyed M. B. Seighalani graduated with his PhD in Soil, Water, and Ecosystems Science. As a student, he

was advised by Dr. Golmar Golmohammadi and his dissertation topic was “Integrating Numerical Simulations, Machine Learning, and Geospatial Analysis for Sustainable Groundwater Management in South Florida.”

Travel and Awards

In late November, students attend the ASA-CSSA-SSSA (CANVAS) International Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah. Chadwade Anderson and Olivia Centanni participated in the student poster competition in the C-6 forage and grazinglands division and Nikitha Reddy Kovvuri participated in the student oral and poster competitions in the ASA environmental quality division. Congratulations to Nikitha, who won first place in the poster competition!

Chadwade is an MS agronomy student advised by Dr. Joao Vendramini. Olivia is an MS agronomy student advised by Dr. Joao Vendramini and Dr. Marcelo Wallau. Nikitha is a PhD Candidate in soil,



water, and ecosystem sciences advised by Dr. Maria Silveira.

In December, Gurjoban Tiwana and Saba Shaghaghi received awards from the UF Dept. of Soil, Water, and Ecosystem sciences (SWES) to attend the 2026 UF Water Institute Biennial Symposium, that was held February 24–26, 2026 in Gainesville. Gurjoban received the SWES Sponsorship, which covers the symposium registration fee, while Saba was awarded a full Student Scholarship to participate in the symposium. The scholarship covers her registration fee (including three lunches) as well as three nights of lodging at the Reitz Union Hotel.

Also in December, Saba Shaghaghi was awarded a full scholarship by Society of Lake Management Professionals (SLMP) to present her research at their 10th annual meeting, held January 19–22, 2026 in Orlando.

Saba, a PhD student, and Gurjoban, an MS student, are advised by Dr. Golmar Golmohammadi.



Saba, Dr. Golmohammadi, and Gurjoban.



Saba speaking in Orlando on Jan. 19, 2026.

Student News (continued)**University of Florida (UF) Alumni – Where Are They Now?****JK Yarborough**

Fall 2016
Graduate

M.S. in
Agronomy

Thesis: ‘Critical levels of

potassium tissue concentration in bahiagrass and bermudagrass.’

Advised by: Dr. Joao Vendramini

After Graduation

JK became a livestock and natural resources Extension Agent serving the people in Orange and Seminole Counties. There he strives to help the people he serves to

understand the latest and most up to date information in animal production. He uses workshops, field days, educational series, conferences and one-on-one visits to accomplish this.

Accomplishments

Together with help from the other Central Florida agents, JK heads up the Beef Cattle Reproductive Management School with Artificial Insemination, which was established 25 years ago. JK says the weeklong event is possible thanks to the great partnerships they have with Deseret Cattle and Citrus, Jones Supply and ABS. Over the years the event has won many awards. JK hopes they can continue its historic success.

A Note of Encouragement

When asked, “Is there anything

else you’d like to share?”

JK responded, “I would like to encourage anyone reading this to think about one of my favorite mottos, the 4-H motto; ‘To Make the Best Better.’ It’s a simple phrase that rings in my head often. A statement to continue down the path of progress, to constantly improve. Think about the avenues in your life and how you could improve upon them. Whether it’s to strengthen family relations, sharpen business resilience, or to just sharpen your pocket knife. Ask yourself how you can Make the Best Better.”

Learn More

To learn more about JK and his work visit <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/orange/agriculture-and-natural-resources/>

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Atkinson, M., Love, A. E., Hendrix, J. G., Kusch, J. M., Ellington, E. H., Vander Wal, E., & Webber, Q. M. R. (2025). Sociality and movement change through space and time: implications for anti-predator strategies in caribou. *Canadian Journal of Zoology*, 103, 1-11. DOI: 10.1139/cjz-2024-0092.

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Biazar, S. M., Golmohammadi, G., Nehunuri, R., Saha, A., & Mohammadi, K. (2025). Advancing soil temperature forecasts: an integrated evaluation of input variable selection techniques and their synergistic potential in predictive modelling. *Environmental Earth Sciences*, 84, 261. DOI: 10.1007/s12665-025-12254-9.

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skaf165

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Castillo, M. S., Griggs, T. C., Digman, M. F., Vendramini, J. M. B., Dubeux, J. C. B & Pedreira, C. G. S. (2025). Reporting forage nutritive value using near-infrared reflectance spectroscopy. *Crop Science*, 65(3), e70063. DOI: 10.1002/csc2.70063

Darling C. L., Mncube T. L., Sellers B. A., Ferrell J. A., Odero D. C., & Dubeux J. C. (2025). Impact of glyphosate, imazapic, and metsulfuron on bahiagrass, vaseygrass, and guinea-grass control. *Weed Technology*, 39, e102. DOI: 10.1017/wet.2025.10034

DeLong A. N., McIntosh M. M., Donovan M., Spiegel S. A., Boughton E. H., Swain H. M., Silveira M. L., Sellers B., Hurst Z. M., & Bestelmeyer B. T. (2025). Engaging stakeholders to strengthen coproduction of knowledge in the Long-Term Agroecosystem Research (LTAR) indicator framework. *Journal of Environmental Quality*, 54(6), 1515-1534. DOI: 10.1002/jeq2.70102

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Diaz, J. M., Lamiño Jaramillo, P., Acevedo, M. A., Campos Krauer, J. M., Gornish, E. S., Romero, A., Ubeda, A. J., & Ellington, E. H. (2025). Extension Interest Assessment: An Evaluation of Hispanics Residents of Florida. *The Journal of Extension*, 63(4), 12. DOI: <https://open.clemson.edu/joe/vol63/iss4/12>.

Golmohammadi, G., Eslami, H. R., Harouni, Eslami, K., Jamali,

Upcoming Events

View our online calendar for a current listing of upcoming events and how to register:

<http://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/calendar-of-events/>

Wildlife & Invasive Species Education Conference

This event will be hosted by Jim E. Davis at the UF/IFAS Extension Sumter County office in Bushnell.

- March 26-27

Register on Eventbrite to attend, [click here](#).

Ona Highlight 'Statewide Assessment of Water Resources'

with Dr. Golmar Golmohammadi

- April 14, 11:00 - 11:45 AM

Click here to register for this Zoom event.

Ona Highlight 'Training the Next Generation of Agriculture Professionals While Bringing Doom to the Whitehead Broom'

with Lindsey Crum and Dr. Carey Minter

- May 12, 11:00 - 11:45 AM

Click here to register for this Zoom event.

Ona Highlight 'Virtual Fence'

with Dr. Juliana Ranches

- June 9, 11:00 - 11:45 AM

Click here to register for this Zoom event.



Sunrise with heavy frost - Jan. 29

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- Nemati Mansour, A, Golmohammadi, G., Javadi, S., Mohammadi, K., Rudra, R., Biazar, S. M., & Neshat, A. (2025). Exceedance probability model for predicting the frequency of summer hot day patterns and temperature variability in Florida. *Science of the Total Environment*. 970, 179000. DOI: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2025.179000.
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December 2025
 ‘Coyotes: Current knowledge and an update on research in Florida’
 - Dr. Hance Ellington

January 2026
 ‘Understanding how cattle management strategies influence vegetative heterogeneity and grassland avian species occupancy’
 - Zachery Holmes

February 2026
 ‘What can we expect from the cattle market in 2026?’
 - Hannah Baker



Florida Cattle Market Update - published monthly in the *Florida Cattleman & Livestock Journal*. These can be accessed on Hannah’s webpage at: <https://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/about/directory/staff/hannah-baker/>

Questions? Contact Hannah at h.baker@ufl.edu or 863-374-7051.

November 2025
 ‘Cattle on feed update!’

December 2025
 ‘Beef Production: Past, present, future’

January 2026
 ‘New year, same signals: Heifer retention still not in full swing, yet’

Ona Reports - published in the *Florida Cattleman & Livestock Journal*. View these on our website at: <https://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/news-and-publications/>

December 2025
 ‘Flood Susceptibility Assessment in Florida’
 - Dr. Golmar Golmohammadi

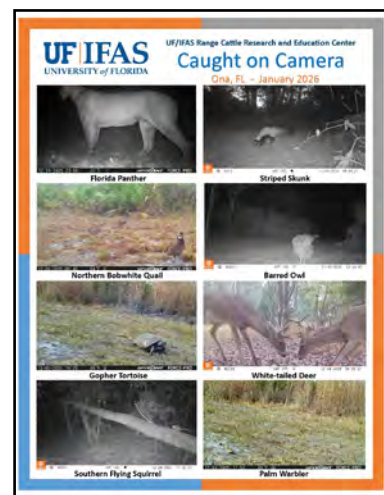
January 2026
 ‘Net Productivity of Pasture-Based Beef Cattle Production Systems in Florida’
 - Dr. Rosvel Bracho

February 2026
 ‘Annual “State of Ona” Address: An UF/IFAS Range Cattle Research and Education Center Update’
 - Dr. Brent Sellers



Caught on Camera - this monthly feature is assembled by the UF/IFAS RCREC Rangeland Wildlife Ecology Program with images collected from game cameras mounted throughout the Center’s property near Ona, FL.

View this and all previous editions on Dr. Hance Ellington’s webpage at <https://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/about/directory/faculty/hance-ellington/>



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Helpful report summary available

- [Annual Cattle Market Update: January 2026](#)

This report provides “across-the-board” information about the beef cattle industry as we head into 2026. Throughout the year, monthly reports will be published highlighting certain sections based on what is happening at that time of year. The annual report tells the whole story of how inventory levels, prices, cattle on feed, and other segments are all intertwined and how they affect the Florida producer.

Questions? Contact Hannah at h.baker@ufl.edu or 863-374-7051.

University of Florida News

Visit <https://news.ufl.edu/> to read about all the latest news.

Blog site offers New World Screwworm Updates -

Check out this blog by Meredith Bauer-Mitchell, senior public relations specialist with UF/IFAS Communications:

‘As New World Screwworm Spreads UF/IFAS Offers Informational Resources, Press Experts’

Note, as new information becomes available on New World screwworm, updates will be posted here:

<https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/news/2025/07/09/screwworm/>

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ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER

This newsletter is a publication of the UF/IFAS Range Cattle Research and Education Center (RCREC) located in South Central Florida in the heart of Florida's cattle country. Our goal is to keep you up to date on RCREC happenings, publications, research, faculty & student news, upcoming events and bring you beneficial information you can use in your beef cattle or forage operation.

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