

The emptying pastures of Kentucky cattle country

By TONI RILEY
REPRINTED FROM THE
FARMER'S PRIDE

Drive through Kentucky cattle country this spring and one thing becomes hard to ignore: there are fewer cows in the pastures. Years of drought, rising input costs and producer downsizing have steadily reduced Kentucky's beef herd, decreasing cattle numbers at the same time consumer demand for protein has increased. The result is a market few longtime producers imagined seeing: top-quality 500-pound feeder calves approaching \$5 per pound at graded feeder calf sales. But even with prices 7.7% higher, consumption has not slowed. Producer Allan Bryant said he did not want to make the statistic too complicated. "Americans consumed 4.3 more pounds of beef in 2025 than they did in 2024," Bryant said.

Kenny Burdine, extension livestock economist with the University of Kentucky, said demand for high-protein foods tied to dietary shifts associated with GLP-1 weight-loss drugs has supported increased beef consumption, even as cattle numbers continue to decline nationwide and prices rise. Bryant is pragmatic about the trend. "People like beef," he said. "There are a lot of cheaper proteins such as chicken and pork on the market, but beef still looks good to consumers on a plate."

Burdine explained the price increase as a simple case of supply and demand. He noted the beef cow herd – the measure he uses most often as a barometer of the beef industry – is at its lowest level in 70 years. According to the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association, Kentucky's cow-calf numbers for 2025 are estimated at 1.85 million head. Total inventory is down 40,000 head from last year, while beef cow inventory is estimated at 869,000 head, a decrease of 38,000 head from 2024. Kentucky remains the largest beef cattle state east of the Mississippi River, even as the commonwealth's cattle inventory continues to decline alongside national herd numbers. The state ranks 14th

nationally in total cattle inventory, according to USDA statistics. Over the last decade, Burdine said three factors have driven herd numbers lower. "From the back end of 2015 to early 2023, a 550-pound steer that's now selling for \$4.50 to \$5 a pound never averaged more than \$2 a pound in the state," Burdine said. During those \$2-per-pound years, producers may have covered cash costs, but many were not making returns on their land, labor or capital investments. The 2022 drought added even more economic pressure, stressing pastures and limiting hay production, which ultimately sent more cows to market. Current prices are also carrying over to heifers. Burdine said a third factor in declining cow numbers is that many producers are opting for immediate cash flow to pay down debt rather than developing replacement heifers into cows. He also pointed to the loss of available farmland.

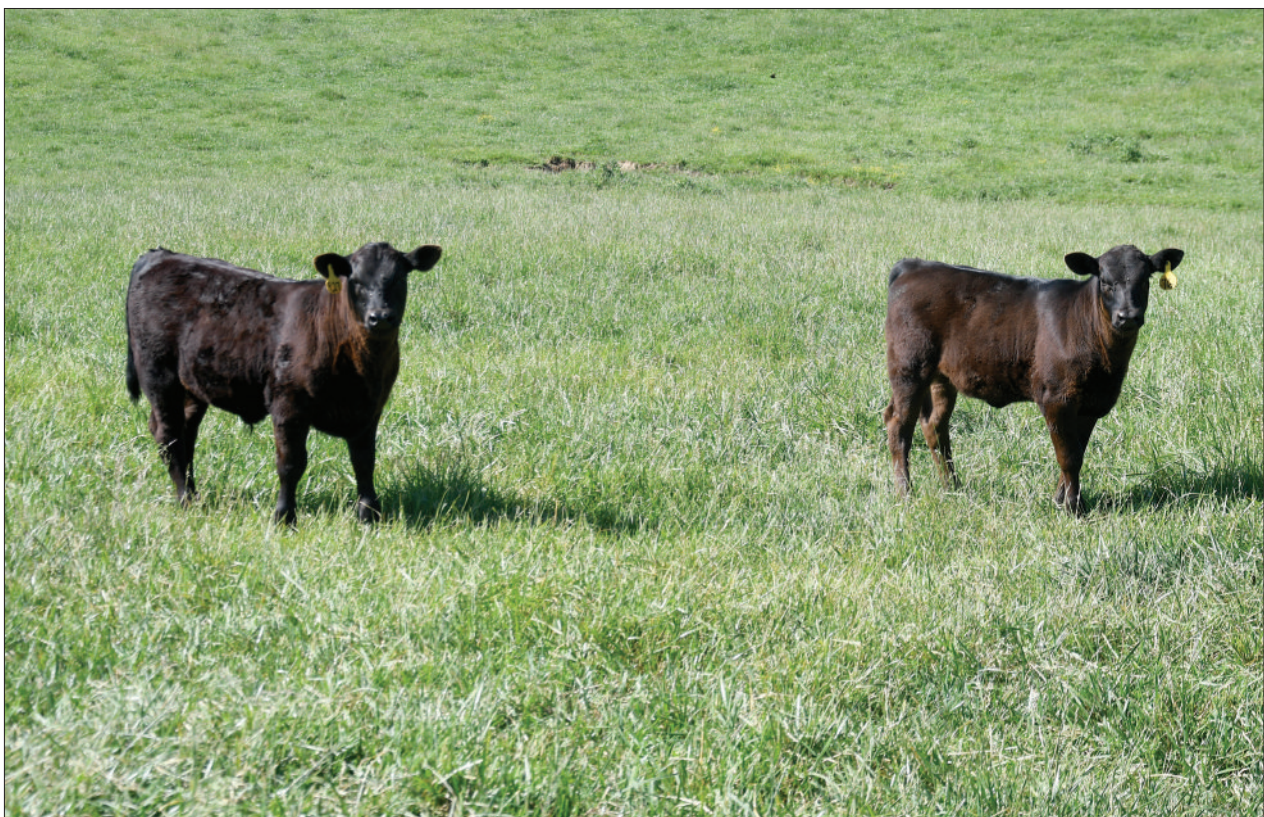
"It takes a lot of ground to run cows," he said. Bryant distinctly remembers those \$2-per-pound years. The beef producer, who began his career with Southern States Cooperative, returned to Henry County in 1990 to farm with his brother. He and his wife, Mary, used their life savings to buy a farm, while Bryant worked for the Kentucky EPA. Tobacco paid the bills, but beef cattle remained his passion.

Bryant learned the importance of soil and pasture management at a young age and became a strong conservation advocate. He carries that philosophy through a strict cattle management program and has built a herd of nearly 300 cows. Unlike many producers, he retains his heifer calves as replacements. His management begins with breed selection. Disposition is his top priority. Calm, gentle cattle are easy to spot as Bryant walks through his spring-calving herd carrying buckets of feed. The predominantly Angus-cross cows do not push or crowd him or one another. Instead, they wait patiently for their turn at the trough. He easily manages



Photos courtesy of Farmer's Pride

Allan Bryant manages his herd through conservation practices that begin with breed selection, placing disposition as his top priority. He pours feed into the trough without concern for aggressive behavior from either the cows or calves.



These two steer calves, born in February, will be weaned this fall at approximately 500 pounds, backgrounded to around 700 pounds and sold at the Tim White Graded Feeder Calf Sale on Dec. 1. By Toni Riley

the moderate-frame cows in the working pens and inserts CIDRs in late May in preparation for breeding and next spring's calving season. Bryant calves about 50 head in the fall and 150 in the spring. His emphasis on conservation and management is especially evident in bull selection for first-calf heifers. He noted he only had to pull one calf this season – and "really didn't have to do that."

Bryant approaches rotational grazing with a forward-looking mindset. He does not want pasture heights to drop below four inches. Walking through one of his fields, he expressed concern about drought and limited spring growth. Laughing, he said the cows let him know when he is

late rotating pastures because they meet him at the gate when the mix of fescue and clover gets too short.

This year, he is excited to test plots of novel endophyte fescue with a group of first-calf heifers. His plan is to soil test and fertilize in the spring, graze the pasture closely and reseed

in the fall to improve seed-to-soil contact.

As he continues walking through his herd of spring calves, Bryant points out beef's nutritional advantages. He proudly notes a 3-ounce serving of lean beef contains about 150 calories, provides 10 essential nutrients and has less than 95 mil-

ligrams of cholesterol.

"As an industry, our number one goal is to stay on the dinner plate of mainstream Americans," Bryant said. "Otherwise, this whole industry changes in less than five years. It doesn't matter what the cut – hamburgers, fajitas, steak or roast – beef has to be there."

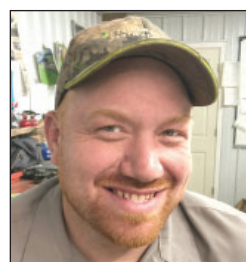
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