

# MARKET ADVISOR

by Tim Petry, North Dakota State University Extension Service

## 2021 Beef Cow Inventory

*Navigating the numbers of the new year's cow herd.*

The USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) released the annual *CATTLE* inventory report on Jan. 29, 2021. It is available at: <https://usda.library.cornell.edu/concern/publications/h702q636h>.

NASS revised several Jan. 1, 2020, numbers released last year. 2020 U.S. beef cow numbers were adjusted upward 22,000 head from 31.32 million to 31.34 million. Beef replacement heifers also went up 37,000 head from 5.77 million to 5.81 million. Some 2020 state level estimates were also revised to reallocate the U.S. total.

As expected, cyclical beef cow herd liquidation continued. Beef cow numbers peaked in 2018 with liquidation occurring during 2019 and 2020.

U.S. beef cows on Jan. 1, 2021, at 31.16 million head were down 181,000 from the 31.34 million on Jan. 1, 2020. That is a decline of about 533,100 head in the past two years.

The decline followed 2014 through 2018 cyclical increases of 376,000; 833,000; 1,007,000; 276,000; and 245,000 head. That five-year increase in beef cows since the cyclical low recorded on Jan. 1, 2014, was 2.7 million head.

A number of factors likely led to the decline in beef cows during 2020. Drought is at the forefront, starting the year in the Four Corners and Pacific Northwest regions and expanding throughout the year into much of the western United States.

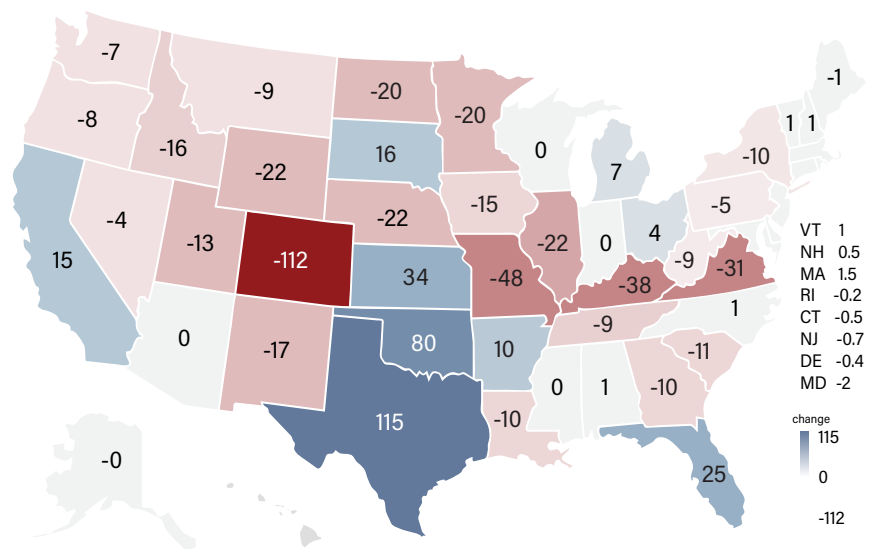
Fewer beef replacement heifers entered the herd, and beef cow slaughter was strong. Harsh winter weather conditions, particularly in some Northern Plains states; reports of more open cows than normal; and narrowing cow-calf margins likely

contributed to the liquidation.

Declines in the beef cow herd centered in the dry intermountain west. Colorado lost the largest number of cows at 112,000 head. Neighboring states' data included Wyoming losing 22,000; New Mexico declining 17,000; Idaho dropping 16,000; and Utah down 13,000.

Drought expanding into the Northern Plains contributed to beef cow declines in Nebraska, North Dakota, Montana, Minnesota and Iowa. Other states with notable

**Figure 1: Change in Beef Cows 2020 to 2021 (1000 Head)**



beef cow declines included Missouri declining 48,000 head; Kentucky losing 38,000; and Virginia down 31,000.

Not all states showed contraction. Several Southern Plains states led expansion, with Texas increasing beef cows by 115,000 head; followed by Oklahoma increasing 80,000; and Kansas adding 34,000 head.

The beef replacement heifer inventory was unchanged from last year at 5.81 million head. The number of bred beef heifers expected to calve in 2021 was 3.55 million, up 1.3%

from last year. The 2020 U.S. calf crop (including beef and dairy calves) declined 1.3% at 35.14 million head.

The combined number of beef and dairy cows and replacement heifers were down just slightly from last year. With a few more beef replacements expected to enter the herd, the 2021 calf crop could be about the same or decline slightly.

Weather and summer pasture conditions are always the wild card affecting changes in beef cow numbers. Much of the western United States is experiencing

drought conditions, with about half the beef cattle herd currently in areas with drought.

Beef herd expansion is not likely and was not expected even with normal moisture conditions. Significant spring and summer rainfall will be necessary in the drought-affected western United States to prevent forced liquidation. **AJ**

*Editor's note: Tim Petry is a livestock marketing economist with the North Dakota State University Extension Service.*

## 2021 ATLANTIC NATIONAL SUPER POINT ROV SHOW and REGIONAL PREVIEW JUNIOR ANGUS SHOW

# May 26-30, 2021

Maryland State Fairgrounds, Timonium, MD

*ROV Show Judge*  
**Brad McCurry, KS**



*Junior Show Judge*  
**Andy Higgins, TN**

**ENTRY DEADLINE – APRIL 15, 2021** (*postmarked*)

Packets will be mailed the week of March 1, 2021, to everyone who made entries in 2019 and 2020.

**Information and Entry Packets:**

**Harry H. Bachman**, *Show Manager* – 2051 Horseshoe Pike • Annville, PA 17003

717-867-1809 Fax 717-867-1279 bachauct@lmf.net