

# Uniqueness Important While Cow Numbers Decline



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The national cow herd has declined in numbers to a level not seen since 1959 according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) statistics. Average age of producers, drought, urban sprawl and input costs were all listed as reasons for a massive number of commercial cows going to market in 2008.

On Jan. 1, 2009, USDA reported that the U.S. beef cow herd had declined by 764,000 head in 2008, down to 31.7 million head. More than 400,000 additional cows were slaughtered in 2008 compared to 2007, while heifer replacements were down another 200,000 head.

In 11 of the last 13 years, the national beef cow inventory has declined, yet total domestic beef supplies remain at near record levels. Certainly, genetic improvement in the area of growth, biotechnological advancement in growth promotants, health technology and ruminant nutrition have all played major roles in the efficiency of the industry. This has driven carcass sizes to record weights.

Rapid production efficiency advancements have become somewhat of a double-edged sword to the seedstock industry. Ultimately, these advancements imposed a general loss in overall demand for seedstock bulls across the industry and pressured many breeds of cattle to change their product in order to survive while other breeds have all but gone away.

In 1996 there were 35.3 million beef cows on inventory in the U.S. Taking into account about a 2.5% (903,000 units sold in 1996) industry-wide commercial artificial insemination (AI) use and a bull to cow ratio of 1:25, the industry demand for commercial range bulls in breeding production was roughly 1.4 million head 12 years ago. Assuming the average tenure of a range bull is three years, the demand for replacement range bulls was approximately 462,000 head in 1996, when the beef industry saw its last inventory cycle peak.

In 2009 annual replacement bull demand is estimated to be as low

as 413,000 down nearly 50,000 bulls (11%) from 1996 levels. Since 1996 AI use has nearly doubled on a percentage basis to more than 4% (1,343,000 units sold in 2007). This trend has dramatically affected the size and scope of the populations of a multitude of breeds of cattle and their respective organizations.

It has driven many of them to novelty status and created clear separation in scalability and significance between the top five to eight largest breeds compared to the balance of the other 90 some different identified breeds in the U.S.

In the last 10 years, market share pressures pushed several breeds toward appendix or composite registry. Most of the Continental European breeds have essentially narrowed their genetic base by introducing the Angus breed into their population. Today the U.S. seedstock industry can be characterized into five distinct genetic breed types including Angus, Angus derivative, Hereford, Charolais and *Bos indicus* influence. Angus and Angus derivative are currently represented in about 80% of the nation's cow herd, while Hereford, Charolais and *Bos indicus* breeds account for a market share of less than 20%.

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## California to host annual BIF meeting and symposium

The 2009 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Research Symposium and Annual Meeting will be April 30-May 3 in Sacramento, Calif. The California Cattlemen's Association and the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association will host the event, themed "Beef Rush '09."

More about the event, including a tentative schedule and registration information, is now available at [www.bifconference.com](http://www.bifconference.com). **HW**

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In recent times, a debate has developed entertaining the notion to open up the Hereford breed for the development of new seedstock products. A small group of breeders have attempted to develop a black baldie registry, producing baldie bulls, which they have mistakenly called "Black Hereford."

Mistaken because they are not Hereford, they are simply "baldies." The Black Hereford concept is a composite seedstock program with the goal of developing a  $\frac{5}{8}$  Angus,  $\frac{3}{8}$  Hereford bull that sustains a black hide color. I question the logic of such a trend for several reasons including: 1) the Angus influence has become extremely saturated within the commercial industry; 2) the cow herd continues to reduce in number, creating an even more

rapid saturation of Angus influence; 3) Angus derivative and other appendix registry breed associations have imported deleterious genes into their populations, creating complicated selection problems; and 4) commercial cattlemen are increasingly seeking heterosis and genetic complementarity, particularly when economics become tough.

In theory, I suppose, baldie bulls used on baldie cows could maintain a certain level of heterosis, but I'm confident that variation will run rampant producing everything from a straight Hereford to a straight Angus and everything in between. Furthermore, continuing to dilute the variation on the nation's beef genetic pool seems to be a dangerous precedent.

For more than 300 years, Hereford breeders have focused their attention on developing traits within a very unique gene pool that is far different from the gene pool of any other breed in the world. Inherent advantages of the Hereford breed have developed over time and become significant advantages in recent economic times. Diluting those genetics could mean the loss of valued genetics that would be difficult to recover. In the end, preserving the Hereford breed's diversity, uniqueness, color pattern and markings, and inherent economic and convenient trait advantages will be the breed's ticket to success during times when other breeds are suffering to find identity and when cattlemen are seeking an economic advantage that an outcross can give them. **HW**