

Small Farm Series: Introduction & Statistics

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Over the next several months this article will focus on applying some of the management practices we have discussed in the past to small-scale beef cattle operations. It is easy to slip into the mindset of thinking about 100-head herds when writing about reproductive or nutritional management. But, for the state of Tennessee, that only applies to a small percentage of farms.

First, we should discuss the statistics describing beef cattle production in the Volunteer State. You have probably heard the general statement that our average herd size is “about 30 head.” But, how do we come up with that number? More importantly, does it really tell us what we need to know about our typical beef cattle herd?

To answer the first question, we can look to the United States Department of Agriculture and their National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA-NASS). To explain it briefly, they produce inventory estimates each January and July. A more detailed characterization of individual commodities is made every five years when the USDA-NASS conducts their Census of Agriculture. The Tennessee Department of Agriculture maintains a field office for the USDA-NASS that collects data for the inventory reports and the 5-year census.

To be more specific about the average mentioned above; according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, we have 33,556 farms with beef cows and a total of 874,630 beef cows. So, the average beef herd in Tennessee actually consisted of 26 cows in 2012. The more recent inventory reports indicate that the number of cattle has continued to decline in the state. But, in building the case for addressing smaller scale production, it is useful to be more descriptive than the overall average. There are only 1,244 farms in Tennessee with more than 100 cows; that represents only about 4% of the total. More than half of the farms have less than 20 cows.

For the approximately 11,000 producers going through the Tennessee Master Beef Producer program over the past 10 years, the average number of mature cows per farm has been 49 head. Producers with larger numbers tend to pursue information about improving management and economic success more aggressively. However, even though smaller herds are not often kept as an important source of revenue for the owner, they represent an area where rapid and massive improvements can be made to the reputation of the state herd and fiscal impact of beef production to the state economy.

With all that in mind – and with some additional statistics throughout this series – we will concentrate on how to apply important management practices to a 25-head-or-smaller cow herd. Take the opportunity to browse through the USDA-NASS and TDA websites for more detailed statistics about beef cattle production in Tennessee and across the United States. Also, feel free to call, write or e-mail during the series if there is a particular topic you would like to see an article about. Lastly, if you are a large-scale operator, these articles will still be helpful. Especially if you maintain several separate herds on different tracts of land.