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Rebuilding the Cow Herd: Better, Not Just Bigger

Three industry leaders share why the path out of drought isn't simply restoring past head counts, but using data, strict replacement standards, and technology to build a resilient commercial herd.



By **Angie Stump Denton** · October 15, 2026 08:00 AM



(Betty Haynes, Midwestern Lens)

Rebuilding the cow herd is about more than keeping heifers or buying bred females. It means deciding what kind of herd a producer needs — and using data, genetics and a clear business plan to get there. The goal shouldn't just be rebuilding back to the peak numbers of the past — it must be about rebuilding better.

Producers need a deliberate plan as they consider rebuilding amid drought, high input costs and market volatility. [Jamie Courter](#), who joined the premiere episode of the [I'm A Drover podcast](#), says producers should start by defining their breeding objective, then use that goal to guide whether they retain heifers, purchase females or hold herd numbers steady.

"You can't manage what you don't measure," stresses Courter, University of Missouri assistant professor and state beef genetics extension specialist. She points to tools ranging from basic weights and production records to technologies such as virtual fencing and satellite ear tags.

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For producers deciding whether to raise replacements or buy bred females, Courter recommends comparing the economics of each option, including the opportunity costs of developing heifers. Raising replacements can give producers greater control over genetics and adaptation to their environment, while buying females may make sense depending on the operation's costs, goals and risk tolerance.

“The U.S. cow herd is right now has what I call a genetic bottleneck. We're really at kind of a peak time where we can start making intentional decisions on our genetics.”

—Jamie Courter,
University of Missouri Beef Genetics Extension Specialist



(Farm Journal)

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Years of punishing drought and culling have left a leaner national herd, but Courter views this moment as a unique turning point for commercial operators.



"If we think about the culling decisions that we've made over the last five or six years, the cows that deserve to go have been culled," she explains. "And so I like to think of where the U.S. cow herd is right now as what I call a genetic bottleneck. We're really at kind of a peak time where we can start making intentional decisions on our genetics. Set a breeding objective for your operation."

Courter also advises treating replacement heifers not as an afterthought, but as a business entity with options.

"A heifer has so many more marketing off-points than a steer does," she says. "At any point from the time that heifer is weaned or even before, until she's bred, there's a lot of different marketing exits and monetary value that heifer has."

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“ We focused for so long on having an animal that fits our environment, and they also have to have that adaptability too. In our case, that's a moderate frame cow that's easy fleshing, low maintenance and can go out and raise a calf. ”

—Jaclyn Wilson, Flying Diamond Ranch

(Farm Journal)

Matching the Cow to the Country, Not the Trend



costs, expanding numbers should never dilute standards.

“My No. 1 goal in our operation is uniformity, and I want to struggle to gate-cut replacements every year,” Wilson explains. “There’s 14 different replacement parameters that go in to that production data before I’ll even phenotype replacement females. If you got this big, beautiful beast that comes across, and she’s got exceptional performance data but she doesn’t fit your goal, you still got to stick with that goal.”

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The panel also stresses the importance of matching cattle to their environment. Wilson describes the type of cow her operation seeks as moderate-framed, easy-fleshing and able to raise a calf through changing conditions.



(Farm Journal)

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while continuing to look for ways to improve the quality and marketability of its cattle.

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He explains that rebuilding can include replacing older cows with younger females to reposition the herd, noting that retaining heifers preserves business optionality: depending on rainfall and pasture capacity, bred heifers can either expand the operation or be marketed to other producers.

“We’re heavily maternally focused,” he explains. “We’re willing to sacrifice a little bit of terminal performance in order to ensure that we are building the best females that we can build in our environment.”

Sawyer highlights their shift to virtual fencing to combat labor bottlenecks and capital costs.

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“Because of the cost of materials and the relatively short life of fencing that we might have near the Gulf Coast, the better capital budgeting decision was to use virtual fencing rather than permanent fencing,” he says. “And as we’ve implemented that, we’ve also seen efficiency gains in our operations in terms of gathering efficiencies and gathering rates.”

Despite the challenges, the panel points to strong consumer demand as a reason for optimism. The aim, they suggest, is not simply to return to a previous herd size, but to make intentional decisions that support productive, adaptable cattle and financially sound businesses.



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