



# **LOWERING BEEF PRICES WHILE REBUILDING AMERICA'S CATTLE SECTOR: Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Domestic Production, Restore Competition, and Build Long-Term Resilience**

By Sarah Carden  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

American consumers are paying record prices for beef, with ground beef prices reaching historic highs in 2026,<sup>1</sup> while the U.S. cattle sector is only beginning to recover from decades of consolidation, drought, herd liquidation, and market instability. Although ranchers are finally beginning to regain a healthier share of the retail beef dollar after years of financial pressure, the sector remains fragile.

The policy challenge is not simply lowering beef prices. It is lowering prices in a way that rebuilds a resilient, competitive domestic cattle sector capable of sustainably supplying affordable beef to American consumers over the long term, instead of weakening the U.S. ranchers needed to restore domestic supply.

Decades of consolidation in beef processing and retail have weakened producer bargaining power, compressed margins, and contributed to long-term declines in domestic cattle capacity. Increasing foreign beef imports may appear to offer near-term price relief, but imports alone will not resolve those structural problems. In highly concentrated markets, additional imports are unlikely to meaningfully lower retail prices and instead risk further weakening domestic production incentives.

A durable long-term solution requires rebuilding the domestic herd, restoring fair competition across the supply chain, strengthening regional processing infrastructure, and creating market conditions that allow independent cattle producers to remain financially viable while consumers gain access to more stable, affordable food prices.

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, *Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: Ground Beef, 100% Beef* (APU0000703112), FRED Economic Data, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/APU0000703112>

## I. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE U.S. CATTLE SECTOR

### A. How the U.S. Cattle Sector Became Vulnerable

The challenges facing today's cattle sector did not emerge overnight. They are the result of decades of consolidation, declining producer bargaining power, and policy choices that weakened domestic production capacity. For years, independent cattle producers have struggled to maintain profitability despite rising retail beef prices, as an increasing share of the consumer beef dollar has been captured by highly concentrated processing and retail sectors rather than by the ranchers themselves.

In the 1970s, the beef packing industry maintained a relatively healthy level of competition, with the top four firms controlling roughly 36% of the market.<sup>2</sup> During that period, cattle producers captured approximately 60–65% of the retail beef dollar.<sup>3</sup> However, beginning in the 1980s, a wave of serial acquisitions rapidly consolidated the industry. As concentration increased, ranchers steadily lost bargaining power and saw their share of the retail beef dollar erode.

By 2020, four companies controlled approximately 85% of the beef processing market,<sup>4</sup> while cattle producers' share of the retail beef dollar had fallen into the 35-40% range.<sup>5</sup> Yet even as ranchers received a shrinking share of the consumer dollar, retail beef prices continued climbing, underscoring that consolidation did not deliver meaningful savings to American families.

These structural market challenges were compounded by a series of external shocks over the past decade, including severe drought, rising feed and input costs, labor shortages, and supply chain disruptions. For many producers, these pressures accelerated herd liquidation decisions and further reduced domestic cattle capacity.

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<sup>2</sup> James M. MacDonald, "Concentration in U.S. Meatpacking Industry and How It Affects Competition and Cattle Prices," *Amber Waves* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, January 25, 2024), <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2024/january/concentration-in-u-s-meatpacking-industry-and-how-it-affects-competition-and-cattle-prices>

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth H. Mathews Jr., *Price Spreads and the Cattle Cycle*, in *U.S. Beef Industry* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Technical Bulletin No. 1874, 1998), 33–37, [https://www.ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/laserfiche/publications/47232/17819\\_tb1874g\\_1.pdf](https://www.ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/laserfiche/publications/47232/17819_tb1874g_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Farm Action, *Agriculture Consolidation Data Hub*, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://farmaction.us/agriculture-consolidation-data-hub/>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Choice Beef Values and Spreads and the All-Fresh Retail Value* (Meat Price Spreads Data Product), accessed August 7, 2026, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/meat-price-spreads>

However, while these factors intensified the crisis, they did not create the underlying vulnerability. The sector had already been weakened by decades of consolidation that reduced producer bargaining power, compressed margins, and made independent cattle operations increasingly difficult to sustain.

## **B. Ranchers Are Beginning to Recover, But the Sector Remains Fragile**

The improved financial conditions some ranchers are experiencing today came at a tremendous cost.

Over the past several decades—and especially during the recent period of drought, rising input costs, and market dysfunction—thousands of cattle producers exited the industry and millions of breeding animals were liquidated. The resulting contraction reduced the national cattle herd to its lowest level since 1951<sup>6</sup>. While tight supplies have improved cattle prices for surviving operations, this recovery reflects the loss of productive capacity across the sector rather than the restoration of a fully healthy marketplace.

Today, ranchers are finally beginning to recover some of their share of the retail beef dollar. Historically tight cattle supplies resulting from a shrinking national herd have strengthened cattle prices, improving returns for many ranchers after years of depressed margins. Recent estimates indicate that cattle producers are once again capturing more than 50% of the retail beef dollar,<sup>7</sup> a significant improvement from the 35-40% range observed in 2020.

But this recovery reflects the loss of productive capacity across the sector, not the restoration of a fully healthy or competitive marketplace. As of January 2026, the U.S. cattle inventory stood at just 86.2 million head, marking the seventh consecutive year of herd contraction.<sup>8</sup>

The current market, therefore, presents both an opportunity and a risk. Stronger cattle prices provide producers with an incentive to rebuild the national herd, but policies that prematurely suppress cattle prices could undermine that recovery and trigger further contraction.

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<sup>6</sup> Kenny Burdine, “The U.S. Beef Cow Herd Contracted in 2025,” *Ohio State University Beef Team*, February 4, 2026, <https://u.osu.edu/beef/2026/02/04/the-u-s-beef-cow-herd-contracted-in-2025/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kenny Burdine, “The U.S. Beef Cow Herd Contracted in 2025,” *Ohio State University Beef Team*, February 4, 2026, <https://u.osu.edu/beef/2026/02/04/the-u-s-beef-cow-herd-contracted-in-2025/>

### **C. Long-Term Consumer Affordability Depends on Rebuilding Domestic Capacity**

Consumers, meanwhile, continue to face record-high beef prices. The average retail price of ground beef reached approximately \$6.90 per pound in April 2026—70% higher than it was in April 2020—highlighting affordability challenges facing American families.<sup>9</sup> This has created pressure for policymakers to identify solutions that improve affordability without weakening the domestic production base.

But long-term affordability will not come from policies that weaken the domestic production base. The goal should be to lower prices by rebuilding a larger, geographically dispersed, more resilient, and more competitive domestic cattle sector capable of sustainably supplying affordable beef to American consumers.

Simply suppressing cattle prices without addressing the decline in domestic production would risk triggering further contraction and long-term instability.

Rebuilding the herd, strengthening regional infrastructure, and restoring competition throughout the supply chain are essential to achieving stable consumer prices, stronger food security, and long-term food system resilience.

## **II. WHY AN IMPORT-DRIVEN STRATEGY WILL FAIL CONSUMERS AND RANCHERS**

While increasing foreign beef imports may appear to offer a straightforward solution to high consumer prices, an import-driven strategy fails to address the underlying structural challenges facing the U.S. cattle sector. In highly concentrated markets, additional imports are unlikely to meaningfully lower retail prices, may undermine incentives to rebuild the domestic herd, and increase dependence on foreign supply chains at a time when the United States is already facing growing food security and trade challenges.

### **A. Additional Imports Are Unlikely to Meaningfully Lower Consumer Prices**

Increasing beef imports does not guarantee lower prices at the grocery store. Today, a small number of dominant processors and retailers exercise substantial control over the beef supply chain.

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<sup>9</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, *Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: Ground Beef, 100% Beef* (APU0000703112), FRED Economic Data, accessed August 7, 2026, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/APU0000703112>

In markets with this level of concentration, additional imported supply may suppress cattle prices paid to ranchers without guaranteeing corresponding savings for consumers.

Recent efforts to expand low-tariff beef imports from Argentina illustrate this dynamic. Although the policy was promoted as a way to improve affordability, economists noted that the additional imports were unlikely to meaningfully reduce grocery store prices given their relatively small scale compared to overall U.S. beef consumption. Some analysts instead suggested that much of the benefit could be captured through improved margins for food companies rather than passed through to consumers.<sup>10</sup>

More broadly, retail food prices often do not fall as quickly as upstream costs.<sup>11</sup> In highly concentrated markets, dominant firms may have a greater ability to retain cost savings through expanded processing and retail margins rather than passing them through at the grocery store. As a result, import-driven policies risk reducing producer returns while delivering little meaningful relief to consumers.

## **B. Imports Risk Undermining Domestic Herd Rebuilding**

The U.S. cattle herd has fallen to its lowest level since 1951 following years of drought, rising costs, and producer exits from the industry. At the same time, those cattle producers who remain are finally beginning to recover a larger share of the retail beef dollar after decades of declining profitability. This recovery presents an opportunity to rebuild domestic cattle production capacity. However, policies that artificially suppress cattle prices through increased imports risk weakening the economic incentives producers need to retain heifers, expand herds, and invest in long-term production. The long-term solution to high beef prices is not simply increasing supply through imports. It is expanding domestic production capacity in a way that allows ranchers to remain financially viable while rebuilding the national herd.

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<sup>10</sup> Leah Douglas and Tom Polansek, “Trump Signs Proclamation Increasing Certain Types of Beef Imports, White House Says,” *Reuters*, February 6, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-signs-proclamation-increasing-certain-types-beef-imports-white-house-says-2026-02-06/>

<sup>11</sup> Luis Ribera, Ted Schroeder, and Jeffrey Bachmeier, “Asymmetric Price Transmission and Retail Meat Prices,” presented at the NCCC-134 Conference on Applied Commodity Price Analysis, Forecasting, and Market Risk Management, St. Louis, Missouri, April 22–23, 2013, [https://farmdoc.illinois.edu/assets/meetings/nccc134/conf\\_2013/pdf/Pozo\\_Schroeder\\_Bachmeier\\_NCCC-134\\_2013.pdf](https://farmdoc.illinois.edu/assets/meetings/nccc134/conf_2013/pdf/Pozo_Schroeder_Bachmeier_NCCC-134_2013.pdf)

### **C. Greater Dependence on Imports Threatens Long-Term Food Security**

At a time when the United States is already facing a growing agricultural trade deficit,<sup>12</sup> policymakers should be cautious about relying on foreign production to address domestic supply challenges. While imports will continue to play an important role in meeting consumer demand, increasing dependence on foreign beef does little to strengthen the long-term resilience of the U.S. food system.

Recent supply chain disruptions have demonstrated the risks associated with concentrated and globally dependent supply chains. Greater reliance on imported beef exposes consumers to additional vulnerabilities, including geopolitical instability, trade disputes, transportation disruptions, and disease outbreaks.

A larger domestic herd would not only improve long-term price stability, but also strengthen U.S. food security by reducing dependence on foreign suppliers during periods of disruption. Imports should complement—not substitute for—a strategy focused on rebuilding domestic production capacity and strengthening the resilience of the American cattle sector.

## **III. A STRATEGY TO LOWER CONSUMER PRICES BY REBUILDING DOMESTIC CAPACITY**

The United States cannot rebuild its cattle herd through market forces alone. Decades of consolidation, declining grazing capacity, and prolonged financial stress have weakened the industry's ability to respond to market signals. Rebuilding domestic production capacity will require a coordinated strategy that strengthens demand for U.S. cattle, incentivizes herd expansion, restores grazing infrastructure, and increases competition throughout the supply chain.

### **A. Restore Mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling (MCOOL)**

Mandatory Country-of-Origin Labeling (MCOOL) would strengthen transparency for consumers while creating stronger market signals for domestic cattle production.

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Agricultural Outlook Forum 2026: Agricultural Trade Outlook* (AES-136), February 2026, <https://ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/laserfiche/outlooks/114207/AES-136.pdf>

Research consistently shows that consumers value clearly labeled U.S. beef and are willing to pay premiums for domestically produced products.<sup>13</sup>

By allowing consumers to distinguish between domestic and imported beef, MCOOL helps ensure that demand for U.S.-raised cattle is reflected throughout the supply chain. In doing so, it sends a clearer economic signal to producers that investments in herd expansion will be rewarded by the marketplace.

At the same time, transparent origin labeling may encourage imported beef to compete more aggressively on price, providing consumers with additional lower-cost purchasing options while allowing U.S. beef to compete on its domestic origin and quality attributes. Restoring MCOOL would therefore not only improve transparency but also support long-term domestic production growth and strengthen incentives to rebuild the national herd.

### **B. Establish Temporary Heifer Retention Incentives**

Rebuilding the domestic cattle herd requires incentivizing producers to retain breeding stock rather than liquidate herds during periods of financial stress. Congress and the Administration should establish a temporary federal tax credit program that provides approximately \$500 per retained breeding heifer.

Because herd rebuilding is a multi-year process, producers often face significant short-term financial costs when retaining breeding stock rather than selling animals into the market. Temporary retention incentives can help overcome this barrier, accelerate herd expansion, and increase future cattle supplies without undermining producer profitability.

### **C. Create a “Build Your Pasture” Program**

Federal agricultural policy has historically encouraged the conversion of pasture and marginal grazing land into row crop production, particularly corn and soybeans. Over time, this reduced available grazing land and weakened domestic cattle production capacity.

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<sup>13</sup> Consumer Federation of America, “Large Majority of Americans Strongly Support Requiring Origin Information on Fresh Meat,” July 24, 2017, [https://consumerfed.org/press\\_release/large-majority-of-americans-strongly-support-requiring-origin-information-on-fresh-meat/](https://consumerfed.org/press_release/large-majority-of-americans-strongly-support-requiring-origin-information-on-fresh-meat/)

The Administration and Congress should establish a temporary pasture restoration program modeled after elements of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

The program should:

- Provide multi-year payments for converting marginal cropland back into pasture;
- Prioritize erosion-prone or lower-productivity acreage;
- Support fencing and water infrastructure investments; and
- Provide establishment assistance during pasture transition years.

Such a program would strengthen long-term cattle production capacity while also improving soil health, drought resilience, and overall agricultural resilience. In addition, converting marginal cropland back to pasture could help reduce persistent oversupply pressures in certain commodity crop markets while promoting more balanced and economically sustainable land use.

#### **D. Protect Working Grazing Lands**

Federal conservation programs should be evaluated to ensure they do not unintentionally discourage working grazing lands or undermine long-term cattle production capacity. Conservation goals remain important, but programs should be structured in ways that preserve resilient grazing systems and support long-term domestic livestock production. Maintaining a strong domestic grazing base is essential not only for herd rebuilding but also for long-term food security, drought resilience, and the economic viability of rural communities.

#### **E. Expand Regional Processing Capacity**

The extreme concentration of beef processing capacity has reduced competition, weakened supply chain resilience, and increased vulnerability to disruption. Rebuilding the national herd without addressing processing bottlenecks risks perpetuating many of the same structural challenges that contributed to the sector's current vulnerabilities.

The Administration and Congress should support the expansion of regional and independent processing infrastructure through targeted financing, technical assistance, and procurement support. Strengthening regional processing capacity would improve competition, reduce bottlenecks, increase marketing opportunities for producers, and create more resilient domestic supply chains.

## **F. Utilize Federal Procurement to Support Domestic Production**

The federal government purchases significant quantities of beef through schools, military installations, correctional facilities, food assistance programs, and other institutional channels. These purchasing programs can serve as powerful market-shaping tools that support both domestic production and a more competitive cattle sector.

Congress and the Administration should prioritize U.S.-raised beef within federal procurement programs and explore opportunities to expand domestic sourcing requirements where appropriate. However, procurement policy should not simply increase purchases from the largest incumbent meatpackers. Instead, federal purchasing programs should be structured to expand market opportunities for independent producers, regional processors, producer-owned cooperatives, and small and mid-sized packing facilities.

For decades, federal procurement systems have often favored large-volume suppliers capable of serving nationwide contracts, reinforcing consolidation within the beef sector. Policymakers should explore procurement reforms that allow smaller processors and regional supply chains to compete for government contracts, including the use of smaller contract sizes, regional purchasing preferences, and set-asides for independent suppliers.

Strategic procurement can help create stable demand, strengthen regional food systems, increase processing competition, and provide producers with greater confidence to invest in long-term herd expansion.

By directing a greater share of government food purchases through competitive and diversified supply chains, federal procurement policy can help rebuild domestic production capacity while reducing dependence on an increasingly concentrated processing sector.

## **IV. RESTORE COMPETITION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE BEEF SUPPLY CHAIN**

Rebuilding the domestic cattle herd alone will not solve the structural challenges facing the beef sector. Without reforms to address concentration and market power, the benefits of increased production may continue to be captured by dominant intermediaries rather than shared with producers and consumers.

Policymakers should therefore pair herd rebuilding efforts with a comprehensive strategy to restore competition, improve transparency, and ensure fair market outcomes throughout the supply chain.

### **A. Strengthen Antitrust Enforcement and Packers and Stockyards Protections**

The Administration should continue prioritizing antitrust enforcement within the cattle and beef sectors. Decades of consolidation in beef processing and food retail have weakened producer bargaining power, reduced competition, and increased supply chain vulnerability.

Federal agencies should closely scrutinize anti-competitive conduct, exclusionary practices, coordinated behavior, and additional consolidation that could further entrench market power or undermine fair competition within cattle markets. Particular attention should be paid to practices that limit market access for independent producers, suppress competition among processors, or reinforce the dominance of a small number of firms.

Policymakers should also carefully evaluate the expansion of vertically integrated production models within the cattle sector. Experience in the poultry and hog industries demonstrates that increased vertical integration can reduce market opportunities for independent producers, concentrate decision-making among a smaller number of firms, and accelerate industry consolidation.

Restoring meaningful competition throughout the supply chain is essential both for long-term producer viability and for ensuring consumers benefit from lower costs and improved market efficiency.

In addition to antitrust enforcement, policymakers should strengthen implementation and enforcement of the Packers and Stockyards Act (P&S Act), one of the federal government's primary tools for protecting fair competition in livestock markets. The federal government should clarify that producers seeking relief under the P&S Act are not required to demonstrate harm to competition across an entire industry in order to challenge unfair, deceptive, discriminatory, or anti-competitive conduct.

Courts have frequently interpreted the law in ways that impose this heightened burden, making it difficult for individual producers to obtain relief even when they have suffered demonstrable harm. This interpretation departs from Congress's original intent and has significantly weakened one of the federal government's primary tools for protecting fairness and competition in livestock markets.

Restoring the P&S Act to its original purpose would provide producers with a more effective mechanism to challenge unfair practices, improve accountability within concentrated livestock markets, and strengthen competition throughout the cattle supply chain.

## **B. Reform Commodity Checkoff Programs**

Federal commodity checkoff programs should be reformed to ensure that producer-funded assessments support the interests of the producers who pay into them and do not undermine domestic production objectives. Under the current system, cattle producers are required to contribute to the Beef Checkoff regardless of whether they support the program's activities.

While checkoff programs were originally established to support research, promotion, and producer education, concerns have grown that checkoff-funded activities do not always align with the interests of independent cattle producers. In particular, producers should not be required to fund promotional activities that increase demand for imported beef or otherwise benefit foreign competitors.

At a time when policymakers are seeking to rebuild the domestic cattle herd and strengthen domestic production capacity, federal policy should ensure that mandatory producer assessments are directed toward supporting U.S. cattle producers and expanding opportunities for domestically raised beef.

In addition, concerns have persisted regarding the relationship between commodity checkoff programs and trade associations that receive checkoff funding while simultaneously engaging in policy advocacy. In some cases, producer-funded organizations have supported policy positions that primarily benefit large processors, multinational meat companies, or other downstream industry interests rather than independent cattle producers.

Congress and the Administration should strengthen safeguards to ensure that mandatory producer assessments are not used to support organizations whose lobbying activities conflict with the interests of the producers who fund the programs.

Congress and the Administration should review existing checkoff authorities and implement reforms that increase transparency, strengthen oversight, prevent conflicts of interest, and ensure that producer-funded programs advance the long-term viability and competitiveness of the domestic cattle sector.

### **C. Improve Market Transparency**

Policymakers should strengthen cattle market transparency and reporting requirements to improve price discovery, support fair competition, and enhance oversight of highly concentrated markets. Improved transparency should include expanded reporting of cattle transactions, packer procurement practices, negotiated cash trade volumes, contract arrangements, and supply chain margins.

Policymakers cannot effectively address anti-competitive conduct in markets they cannot adequately observe.

Greater transparency would help producers make more informed business decisions, improve market confidence, and provide regulators with better tools to identify market manipulation, exclusionary conduct, and structural market imbalances.

The need for improved transparency is underscored by the fact that in some regions, market concentration has become so severe that USDA can no longer publicly report certain price data without violating confidentiality requirements. For example, negotiated fed cattle prices in Colorado have not been publicly reported for several years because too few packers participate in the market to satisfy USDA's confidentiality thresholds.<sup>14</sup>

When concentration reaches a point where basic market information can no longer be disclosed, both producers and policymakers lose critical visibility into market conditions. Strengthening transparency and restoring competitive market structures are therefore complementary goals.

### **D. Investigate Pricing and Margin Expansion Practices**

Federal agencies should conduct a comprehensive review of pricing dynamics and margin expansion practices throughout the beef supply chain, particularly during periods of supply disruption and elevated consumer prices.

Over the past several decades, consumers have continued to pay increasingly high beef prices even as cattle producers received a declining share of the retail beef dollar.

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service, Colorado Weekly Weighted Average Direct Slaughter Cattle Report – Negotiated Purchases (LM\_CT150), various issues, accessed June 8, 2026, [https://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/ams\\_2486.pdf](https://www.ams.usda.gov/mnreports/ams_2486.pdf)

This divergence raises important questions about how value is distributed throughout the supply chain and whether concentrated processors and retailers are capturing an increasing share of industry profits. Improved monitoring and investigation of supply chain margins would help policymakers better understand the drivers of consumer prices, identify potential abuses of market power, and inform future competition and consumer protection efforts.

#### **E. Pass a Federal Price Gouging Law**

Congress should establish a federal price gouging framework that can be utilized during periods of severe supply disruption, market concentration, or national emergency. Currently, most price gouging protections exist only at the state level and are often limited in scope or tied to emergency declarations. In highly concentrated food supply chains, dominant firms can expand margins during periods of disruption while both consumers and producers remain financially strained.

A federal price gouging law would provide federal agencies with an important enforcement tool to investigate and address excessive price increases, unjustified margin expansion, hoarding, or other opportunistic conduct during periods of market stress. Such a framework would help ensure that supply disruptions are not used as an opportunity to extract excessive profits at the expense of consumers, producers, or food system resilience.

#### **F. Utilize Defense Production Act Authorities During Supply Chain Disruptions**

The Administration should evaluate whether critical cattle and beef supply chain inputs, infrastructure, or processing capacity should be designated as scarce or threatened resources under the Defense Production Act (DPA) during periods of severe supply disruption or market instability.

Because federal authorities currently have limited tools to address opportunistic conduct during periods of constrained supply, DPA authorities could strengthen federal preparedness and enforcement readiness during emergencies. In highly concentrated markets, these authorities may serve as an important deterrent against hoarding, supply manipulation, or other conduct that could exacerbate shortages and contribute to price spikes.

While DPA authorities are not a substitute for long-term competition policy or supply chain reform, they may provide an important emergency response mechanism when disruptions threaten food security, market stability, or domestic production capacity.

## V. CONCLUSION

Today's high beef prices are not simply the result of insufficient supply. They reflect decades of consolidation, weakened domestic production capacity, and increasingly fragile supply chains.

At the same time, the cattle sector stands at a critical inflection point. The stronger cattle prices many ranchers are experiencing today reflect not a fully healthy marketplace, but the loss of producers and productive capacity that reduced the national herd to its smallest size in more than seventy years.

While surviving operations are finally beginning to recover some of their share of the retail beef dollar, that recovery was achieved through a painful period of producer exits and herd liquidation. Policymakers should be careful not to undermine the price signals needed for herd rebuilding through short-term solutions that weaken domestic production incentives while failing to address the structural causes of high consumer prices.

Consumers and ranchers are not competing interests. Long-term consumer affordability depends on maintaining a healthy, competitive domestic cattle sector capable of sustainably producing beef at scale.

The most effective path to lower prices is not greater dependence on imports, but rather a comprehensive strategy that rebuilds domestic production capacity, restores competition throughout the supply chain, strengthens regional processing infrastructure, and improves food system resilience.

By pairing herd rebuilding efforts with meaningful competition reforms, policymakers can lower costs for consumers, create new opportunities for independent producers, strengthen food security, and build a more resilient and competitive cattle sector for future generations.