THE RANCH ACT

The Rebuilding America's National Cow Herd (RANCH) Act

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SUMMARY

The United States beef cow herd has contracted to its smallest size in over 70 years. Record-high beef prices at the grocery counter reflect this supply shortage, placing real economic pressure on American families. Rebuilding the national herd is constrained not only by drought and high input costs, but by a critical shortage of available, affordable grazing land. Without a mechanism to expand the grazing land base, herd recovery will remain slow regardless of market incentives.

Across the country, some cropland acres produce reliably year after year while others are better suited for perennial cover and grazing. Today, farmers and ranchers are limited in making the choice to restore grasslands on the acres where it makes sense. The RANCH Act creates a new path: a voluntary program that helps offset foregone crop income as producers convert marginal cropland back to grass, providing forage resources that allow existing operations to expand and create opportunities for young and emerging producers.

The RANCH Act establishes a new voluntary grazing land restoration program that would open up to 20 million new acres for grazing — helping rebuild and sustain the American cowherd, increasing domestic demand for U.S.-grown grain and forage, and securing a homegrown, affordable beef supply for American families.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Element	Description
Eligible Acres & Priority	Land must have a cropping history or be considered planted for at least 4 of the last 6 years. Enrollment priorities include beginning farmers and ranchers, owners/operators who currently operate a livestock grazing operation or plan to start one, wildlife habitat, high-quality diverse native seed mixes, highly erodible land, and marginal cropland.
Cover Establishment & Grazing Plan	Requires establishment of perennial grass and forb cover appropriate to the region, soil type, and intended grazing use, as determined in consultation with USDA. Haying is permitted only under emergency conditions; clipping or mowing to assist stand establishment is allowed. All enrolled acres must have an approved, site-specific grazing management plan in place within two years of enrollment. Technical assistance is available for the duration of the contract.
Contract Requirements	10–15 year contracts. Acres expiring from the program are not eligible for re-enrollment. Upon contract expiration, enrolled acres will be automatically enrolled in Grassland CRP.
Rental Rates	Annual rental payments equal 75% of the county average dryland cash rental rate for cropland, based on NASS data, with no adjustments for soil productivity. This flat county rate encourages marginal land enrollment without overpaying for higher-value cropland.
Cost-Share & Incentives	50% cost-share for cover establishment, increased to 75% for beginning farmers and ranchers. An additional 50% incentive is available for high-quality, diverse native seed mixes. Enrolled acres are eligible for cost-share from complementary programs such as EQIP, provided no duplication of practice cost-share occurs.
Acreage Target	The program shall be capped at a total enrollment of 20 million acres. Enrollment may be limited if there is an expected shortage of commodities grown on the cropland targeted for enrollment.

CARRYING CAPACITY AND BEEF SUPPLY IMPACT

- 20 million acres supports 2-4 million head of cows and rebuilds to previous levels that more adequately meet domestic demand and support growing export demand.
- According to recent surveys by Terrain, the top things keeping producers from rebuilding and growing are grazing condition concerns, drought forecasts and pasture availability. [1]
- According to a South Dakota State University white paper, with a 5-month grazing period, that would be aggregate demand of 16.75 million AUMs. An additional 1.0 million acres of grazable area would thus support 141,242 cow-calf pairs. [2]
- According to USDA-ERS the US had 95 million head in 2019 but only approximately 86.7 million head in 2025. [3]

KEY BENEFITS

- **Strengthens American food security** by expanding the domestic beef supply and reducing reliance on imported beef.
- **Puts American ranchers first**, expanding the grazing land base needed to rebuild the national cowherd and meet growing consumer demand.
- **Expands domestic demand for American-grown grain and forage**, giving U.S. farmers a stronger, more reliable market as the cattle herd grows.
- **Supports commodity prices for row crop producers** by modestly tightening grain supply through a reduction in planted acres.
- **Makes U.S. farmers and ranchers more competitive** in the global marketplace while building a stronger domestic agricultural base.
- **Enhances water quality, soil health, and wildlife habitat** through established perennial cover and managed grazing.
- **Reinvigorates rural communities** through the economic benefits of increased livestock production, grain demand, and wildlife populations.
- **Lowers the barrier to entry for beginning ranchers** through targeted cost-share and signing incentive payments, bringing the next generation onto the land.

[1] https://www.terrainag.com/insights/a-cautious-start-to-herd-rebuilding/
[2] https://extension.sdstate.edu/conservation-grazing-and-forage-situation
[3] https://ers.usda.gov/topics/animal-products/cattle-beef/sector-at-a-glance

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