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## **Number of beef cattle farmers dwindling in state**

By TONYA S. GRACE  
Todd County Standard

Not as many younger guys are fooling with beef cows in Todd County.

“There’s just so many opportunities with grain farming, and there’s a big investment with cows,” observed Daysville farmer Tony Berry. “It takes a lot of land, and there’s a slow return.”

Berry predicted there will continue to be some beef cow farmers in the county in the future, but those numbers will not be on as large a scale as they once were, he said.

Instead farmers are considering the improved prices for grain and making the switch to grain crops wherever the ground is good to grow them, and they are selling their cows.

With declining cow numbers right now, the prices for beef are also better.

“Anybody that’s got cattle now is reaping the rewards of having cattle because they’re higher than they’ve ever been and probably will stay high,” Berry noted.

He said he believes those in the industry need to promote their product.

A member of both the Todd County and Kentucky cattlemen’s associations, he pointed to threats from groups and individuals who don’t support beef consumption.

“I just think it’s important we try to promote the beef,” Berry said. “It’s a healthy product. It’s got a whole lot of protein in it, lean beef does.”

The Todd County man said he used to have around 500 to 600 feeder cattle through the winter, but his numbers have dropped now to 60 feeder calves and 80 mother cows. At 65, Berry said he’s getting ready to retire and didn’t want to waste his family’s money feeding high-priced corn to his cows.

His cattle are among a total of 19,300 cattle in the county. Numbers from the National Agricultural Statistics Service noted that Todd County had 7,200 beef cows in 2011, 2,600 milk cows and 9,500 remaining cattle like calves and bulls.

Since 2007, the state has lost more than 200,000 beef cows, according to Kenny Burdine, an extension livestock and forage economist with the University of Kentucky’s Department of Agricultural Economics.

Burdine said Kentucky had about 1.2 million beef cows in 2007, and U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates for 2012 put the current figure at just less than one million cows, he said.

“One of the things we can look at that comes out of that report is how many heifers, or young females, they’re holding in anticipation of those heifers entering the cow herd,” he said.

“There was a decrease (in the numbers of) heifers being held so it would suggest that the numbers won’t increase for this year.

“It looks as if it will be awhile (before the) numbers will be back up,” Burdine continued.

If heifers were held in 2012, he said, they wouldn’t wean their first calves until 2014, meaning it would be some time before larger numbers of calves would be seen at the local auctions.

Additionally, declining cattle numbers coupled with strong beef exports reduce the amount of beef available to consumers in the United States, thus explaining the higher prices for beef.

Burdine noted that cattle producers had a good year in 2011, and it looks as if they will have a similarly good year in 2012, he said. Given those circumstances, he believes Todd County will also do well this year.

Burdine said three factors have caused declines in national cattle numbers in the past few years, namely, drought, profitability and conversion to row crop production.

Ground used for hay and grazing for the cattle has been converted into row crops like beans and corn, and the same pattern has been seen across the state as well, especially in the local area, Burdine said.

He also cautioned that while beef prices are very strong, the production costs for the farmers are very high, making for a volatile market.

Berry said he’s been farming ever since he got out of high school, not only beef cattle, but raising grains such as corn, soybeans and wheat.

He said he has especially enjoyed working with the cattle.

“I’ve grown up with them, and I like to fool with them,” he said. “I’ve made good money through the years. It takes a lot of work.”

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## **Small family dairies struggle against corporations, milk prices**

By TONYA S. GRACE  
Todd County Standard

Alvin Frogue’s cows are early risers.

Up well before the crack of dawn, they expect to be milked at 1:45 a.m. every day. They expect the same people, the same feed and the same facilities, and any change in their routine can mean a big drop in milk production.

It's Frogue's job to make sure that doesn't happen. Since 1999, he's been getting up early just to satisfy the fussy bovines.

The cows are milked again in the afternoon.

Same time, 12 hours later: 1:45 p.m.

"We don't change nothing," said Frogue, who's been milking cows for 60 years, for all of his life, he says.

Now a partner with his son Kevin in Frogue Dairy in south Todd County, Alvin Frogue notes that his operation is likely one of the few remaining English dairies in the county; most today are run by Mennonites whose children make up a workforce, and the same is true in neighboring counties like Christian and Trigg.

"Most of the dairies in those three counties are Amish or Mennonite," said Dr. Jeffrey Bewley, a dairy extension specialist with the University of Kentucky who noted that the Amish and Mennonites like the dairy lifestyle for their families.

Being a dairy producer is hard work, Bewley said, citing the one reason he thinks some people choose not to do it; in Kentucky there are 863 dairies scattered throughout the state, he said, including 26 in Trigg County, 48 in Todd.

Christian County has 94, the most of any county in the commonwealth.

Bewley said he thinks there's a lot to be positive about in the three counties, a lot of growth in the area and progressive dairy producers, including young ones who are planning to be in the business for a while, he said.

"For me, I have the most optimism for the dairy industry in that part of the state," Bewley notes. "When you see that many dairies in that one area doing well, it becomes part of the culture to do well."

Bewley said he thinks the state as a whole will continue to have a strong dairy industry. It offers a lot of natural resources like rain and doesn't have long periods of cold to hamper the industry, he said.

Across the nation, Bewley expects to continue seeing fewer dairies and larger ones, more Amish and Mennonite operations and some that work within a niche market.

But Frogue said he believes his size dairy — his has 225 lactating, or milking, cows, 50 dry milking cows and 300 replacement heifers — will sooner or later be pushed out because of the

corporate dairies and the investments in those larger dairies.

“Across the state there’s several of us, (and) I just don’t see there’s a future,” he said. “The family dairies are in danger of being pushed out by the corporate dairies.”

The Guthrie dairyman said he believes it will be a challenge for his grandson to milk anything and stay the size Frogue Dairy is today, and he noted that 13-year-old Clay likely will be pushed out if his dairy operation doesn’t grow.

Alvin Frogue has been a part of the dairy industry since his youth. His father started milking in the 1950s, and Alvin was only 6 years old when he picked up his first bucket. Milking was done by hand then, not automated like it is today, and the buckets of milk were poured into 10-gallon cans.

“If we shipped five cans a day we were doing great,” Alvin remembers.

His father and brother bought the farm the family has now in 1963, Alvin said, and he and his brother Allen bought out their father in 1974. Twenty-five years later, Allen Frogue quit milking, and Alvin and his son bought Allen out.

His son Kevin will be the next to have the operation, Frogue said.

He and Kevin operate the dairy with the help of Clay and three full-time hired hands and, along with their milking operation, they raise a lot of corn, silage and hay to feed the cows. For their lactating cows, they buy alfalfa from out west.

They also do most of their own veterinary work, perform inseminations for their animals, do hoof trimming and mix their own food every day, all making for a very labor intensive job.

Given that labor, the overhead and cost of the feed, Frogue said his dairy is “more or less breaking even right now.” He and son Kevin are also struggling with a lower price for their milk — \$1.75 per gallon in February and even less now — but the father is hopeful prices will rebound in the next few months.

They’ve dropped \$6 per hundredweight in the past two months, and Frogue now gets about a third of what the store gets for its milk.

He said his dairy ships 13,000 pounds of milk per day (8.6 pounds make a gallon) to Purity Direct in Nashville, Tenn. Most of it becomes Dean’s Milk and goes throughout the southeast. Some of Dean’s comes back to Elkton and can be found on the shelves of Food Giant.