Is Our Food System Failing?

By Mike Callicrate



October 29, 2026

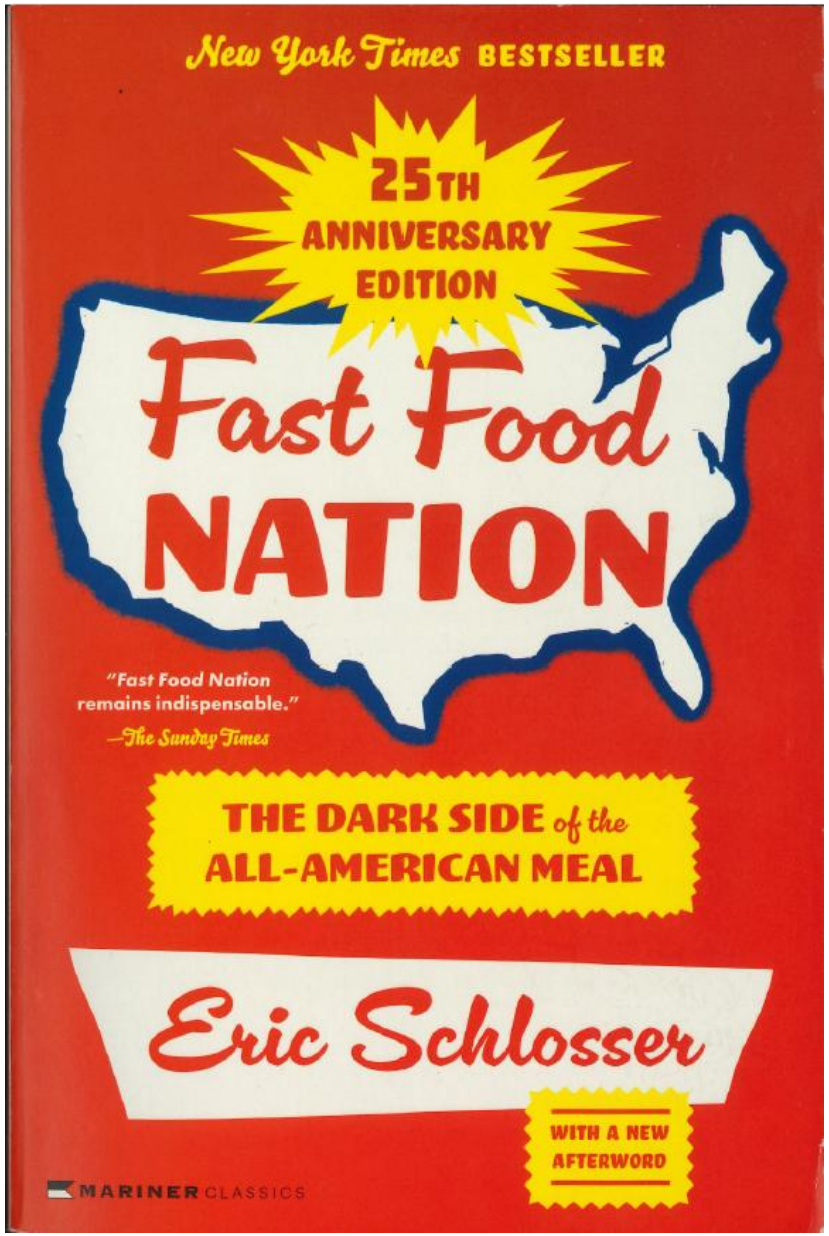
Cows and calves at Callicrate Cattle Co.

The U.S. is now a net food importer with deteriorating food infrastructure.

“A nation that cannot feed itself is not free.”

- La Via Campesina





“It’s even worse today.”

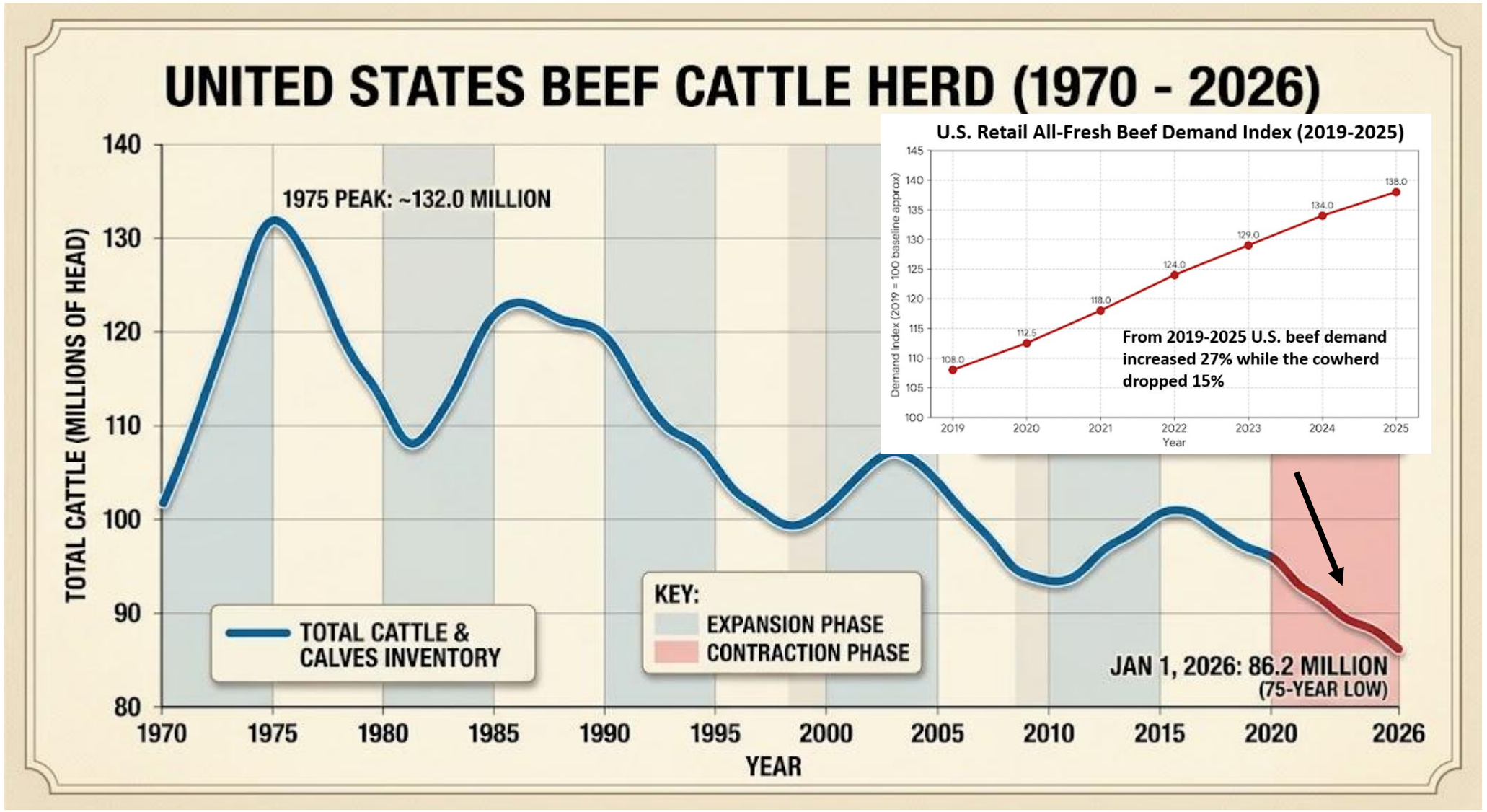
Food Cartel Slaughtered the Cowherd

A Golden Goose Story

Driven by a historic decline in the U.S. cattle herd and rising operational losses, several "too big to fail" meat packing facilities have closed or scaled back operations:

- **Joslin, Illinois (Tyson Foods):** Permanently closed its major beef slaughterhouse in August 2026, eliminating over 2,500 jobs and impacting Midwest cattle producers.
- **Lexington, Nebraska (Tyson Foods):** Closed its primary beef processing plant in January 2026, which previously processed around 4,500 head of cattle per day.
- **Souderton, Pennsylvania (JBS USA):** Announced plant closures and major beef capacity reductions in mid-2026, hitting East Coast markets.
- **Eagle Mountain, Utah (Tyson Foods):** Shut down its case-ready meat processing facility in August 2026.
- **Amarillo, Texas (Tyson Foods):** Scaled back throughput from 5,500 head per day to a single shift of 2,800 head per day to manage livestock supply constraints.
- **Pasco, Washington (Tyson Foods):** Put up for sale as Tyson scales back operations in the Pacific Northwest.
- **Plainview, Texas (Cargill)** closed in 2013 citing low cattle numbers and drought.
- **Denison, Iowa (Tyson)** closed in 2015

A big food cartel has eliminated the connection between live cattle markets and retail beef prices.



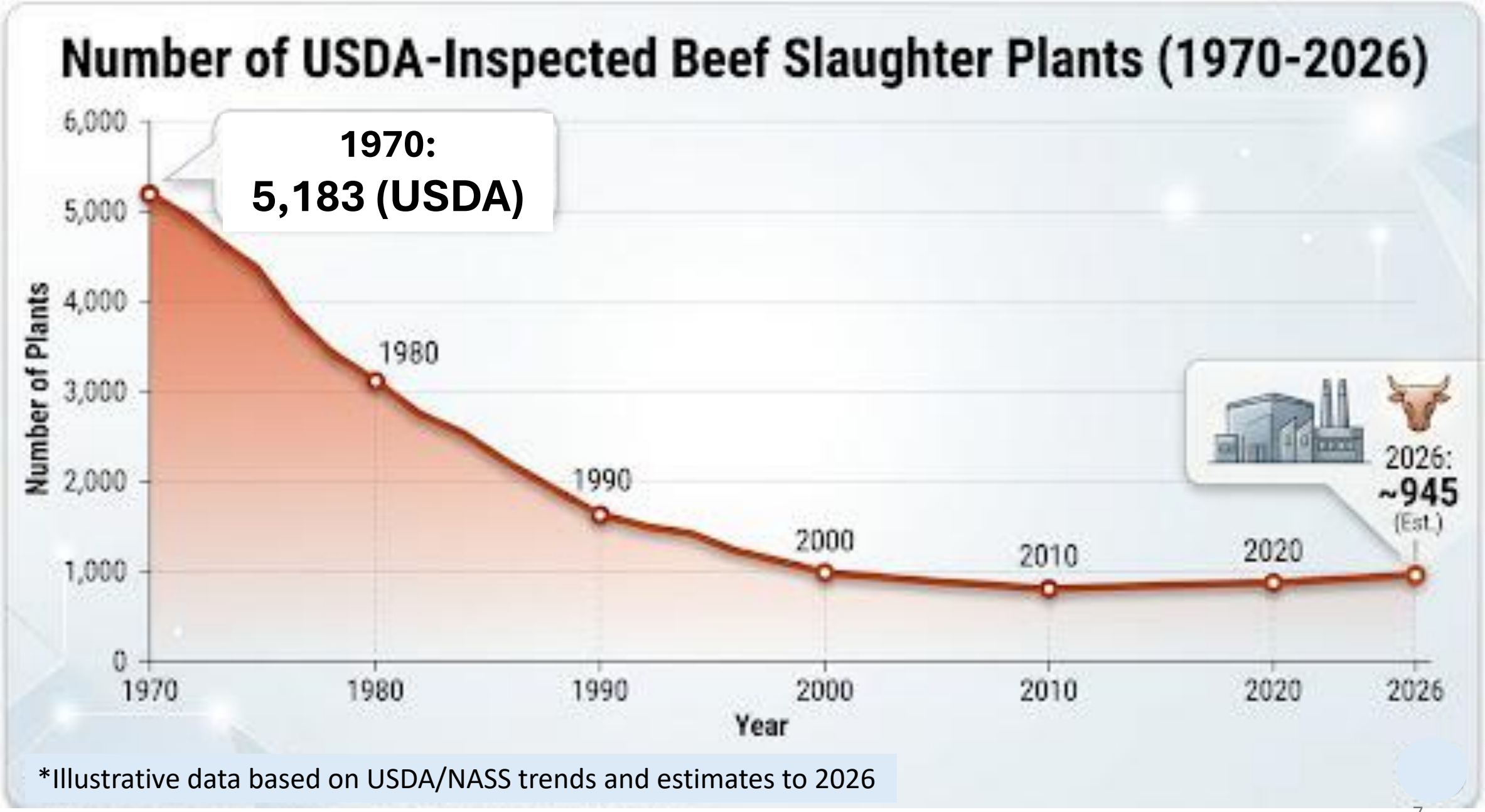


Almost 80 percent of small livestock producers will be without an abattoir soon - but legislation says they can't kill their own cattle, a Wide Bay co-authored study says.



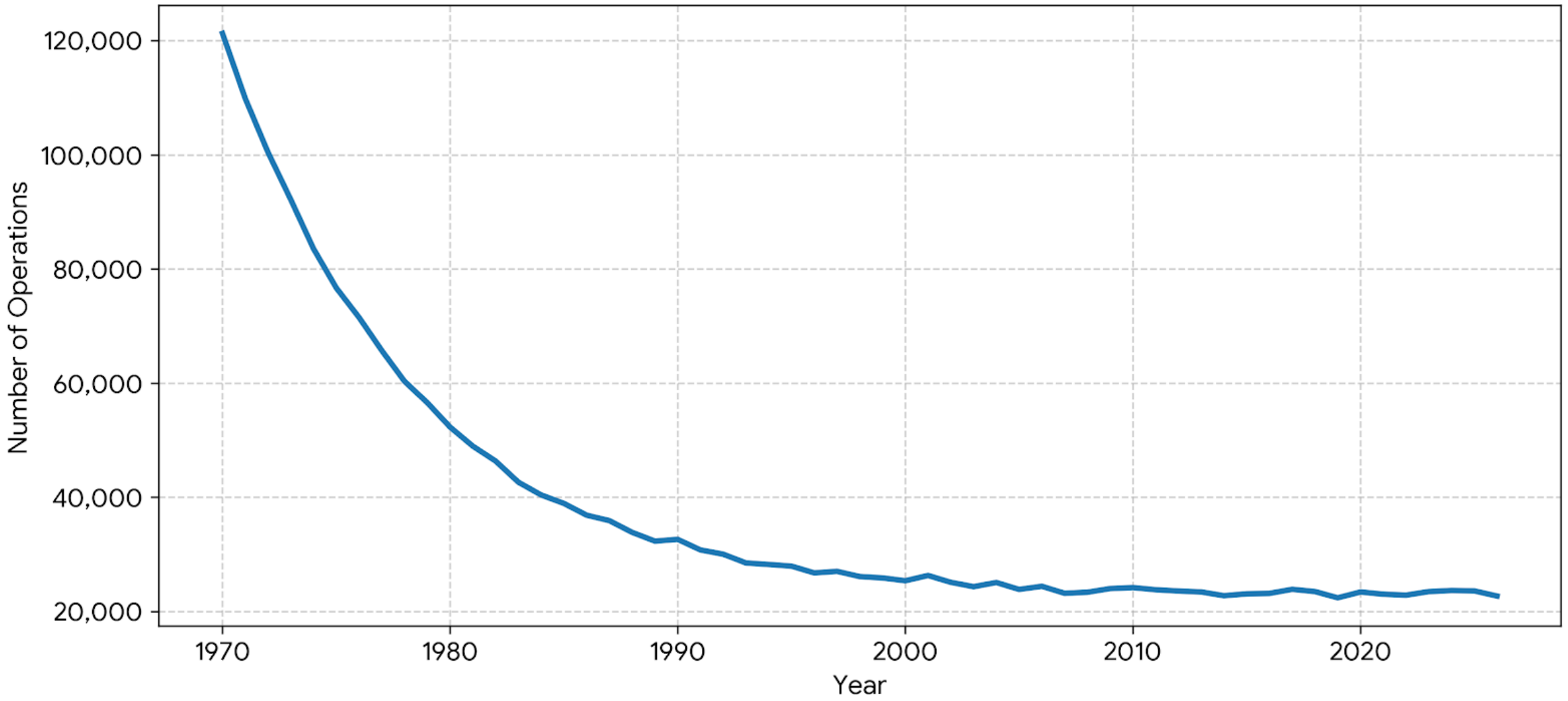


The UK abattoir crisis has reached a critical stage as the number of active slaughterhouses has plummeted by more than 90%, dropping from approximately 2,500 facilities in the 1970s to around 200 today.



*Illustrative data based on USDA/NASS trends and estimates to 2026

U.S. Cattle Feeding Operations (1970-2026)

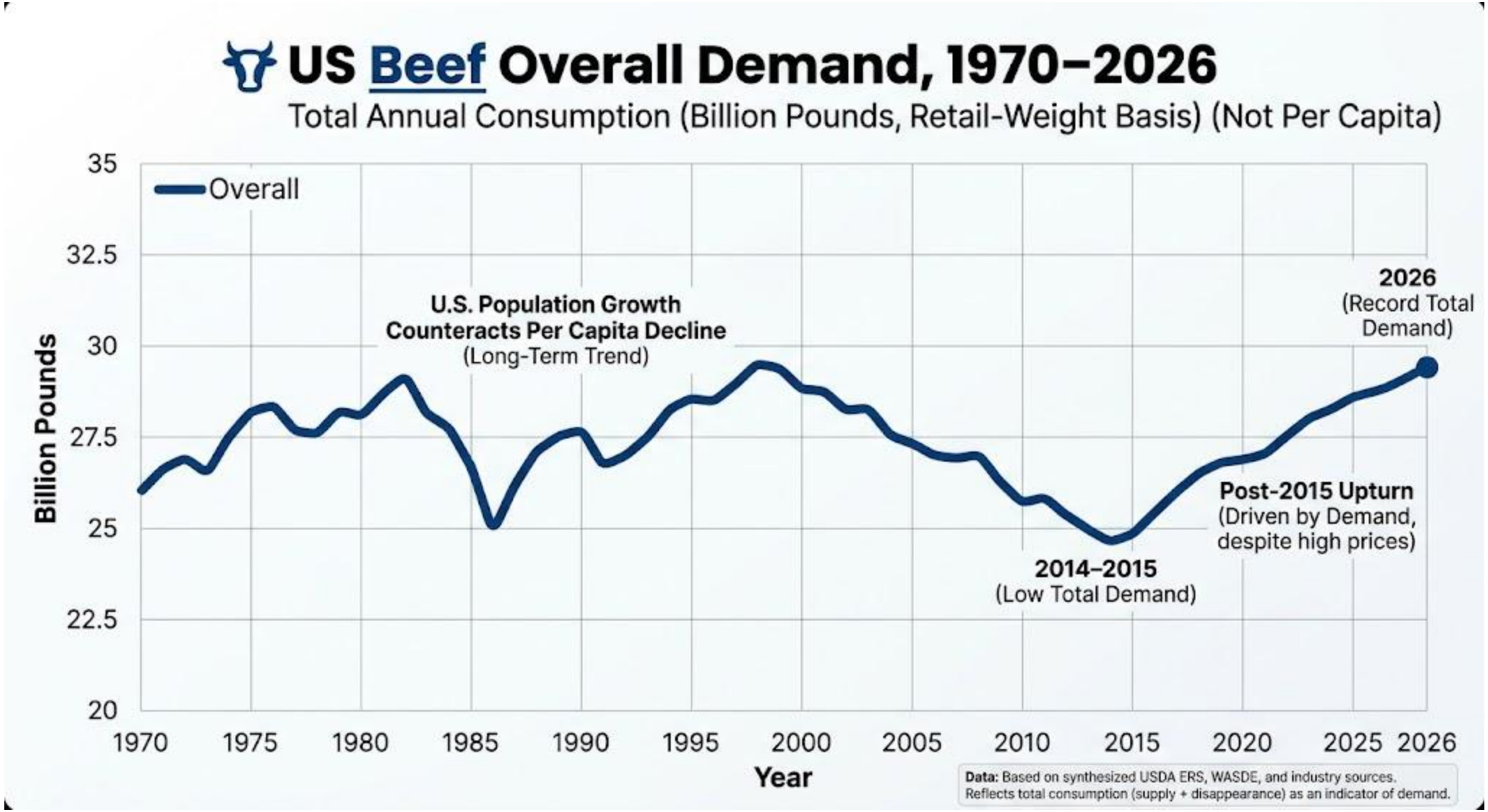


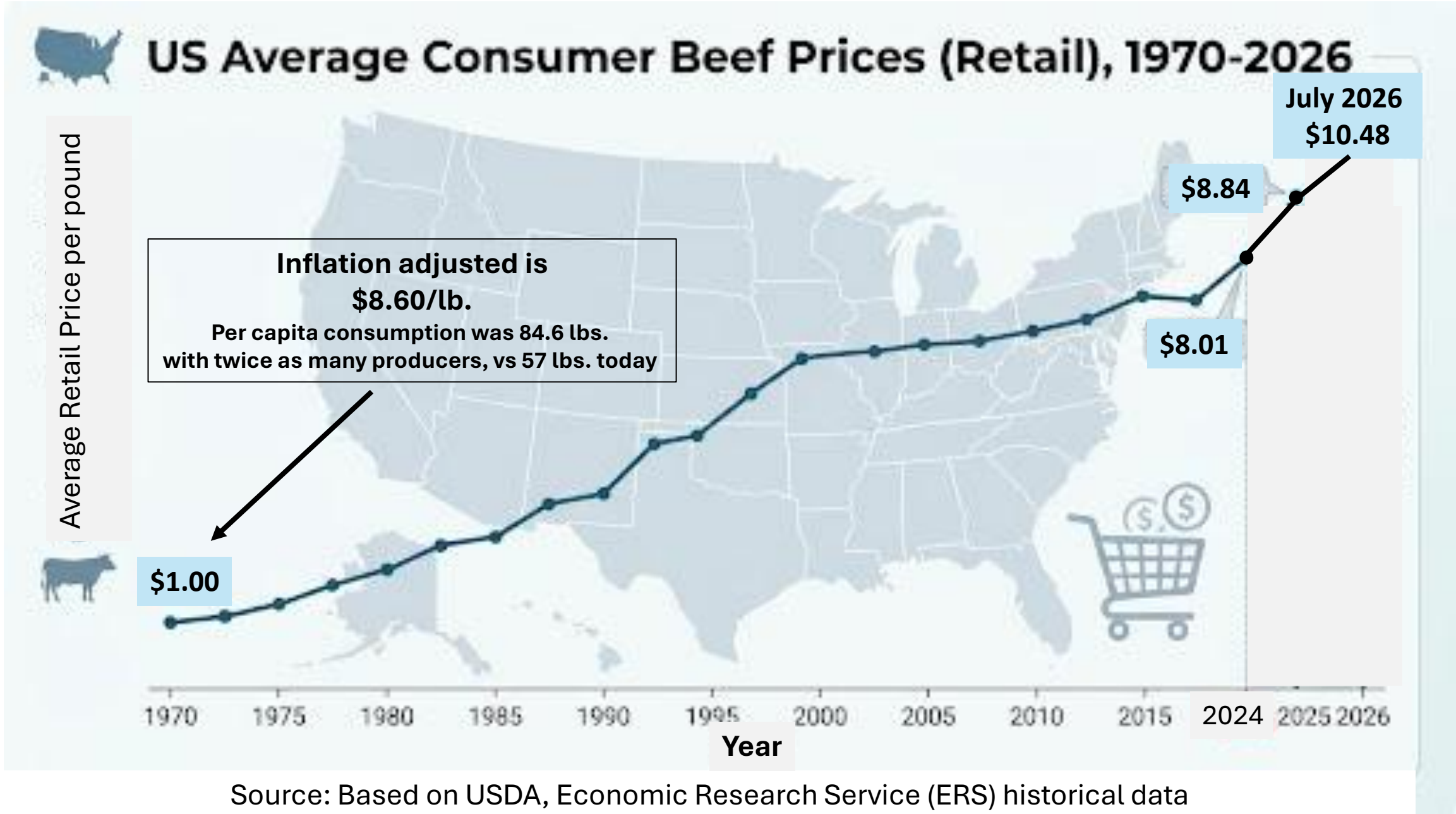
“…the price of dressed meat had increased nearly fifty per cent in the last five years, while the price of “beef on the hoof” had decreased as much, it would have seemed that the packers ought to be able to pay; but the packers were unwilling to pay…”

– *The Jungle 1906*

The collapse of the cattle herd has occurred at the same time beef demand and beef prices have reached record highs.

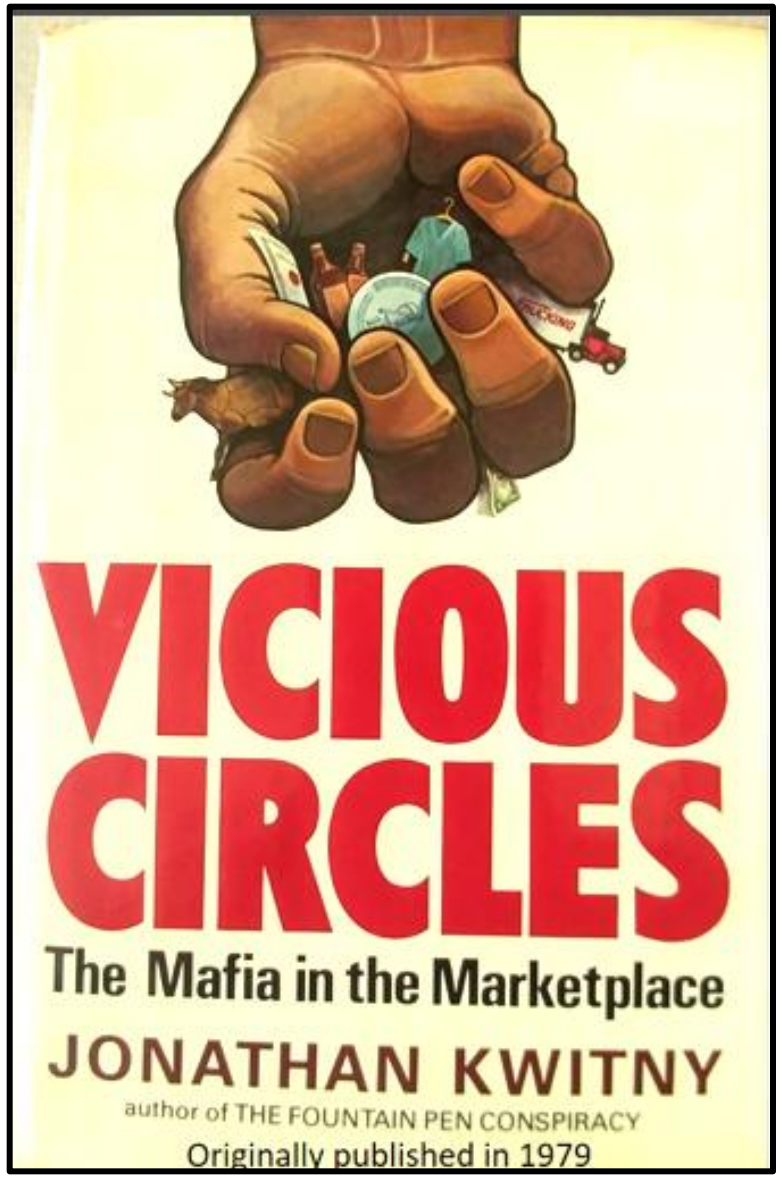
- Return to the Jungle 2026


US Beef Overall Demand, 1970–2026
Total Annual Consumption (Billion Pounds, Retail-Weight Basis) (Not Per Capita)
Overall
Billion Pounds
35
32.5
30
27.5
25
22.5
20
U.S. Population Growth
Counteracts Per Capita Decline
(Long-Term Trend)
2026
(Record Total
Demand)
Post-2015 Upturn
(Driven by Demand,
despite high prices)
2014–2015
(Low Total Demand)
1970
1975
1980
1985
1990
1995
2000
2005
2010
2015
2020
2025
2026
Year
Data: Based on synthesized USDA ERS, WASDE, and industry sources.
Reflects total consumption (supply + disappearance) as an indicator of demand.



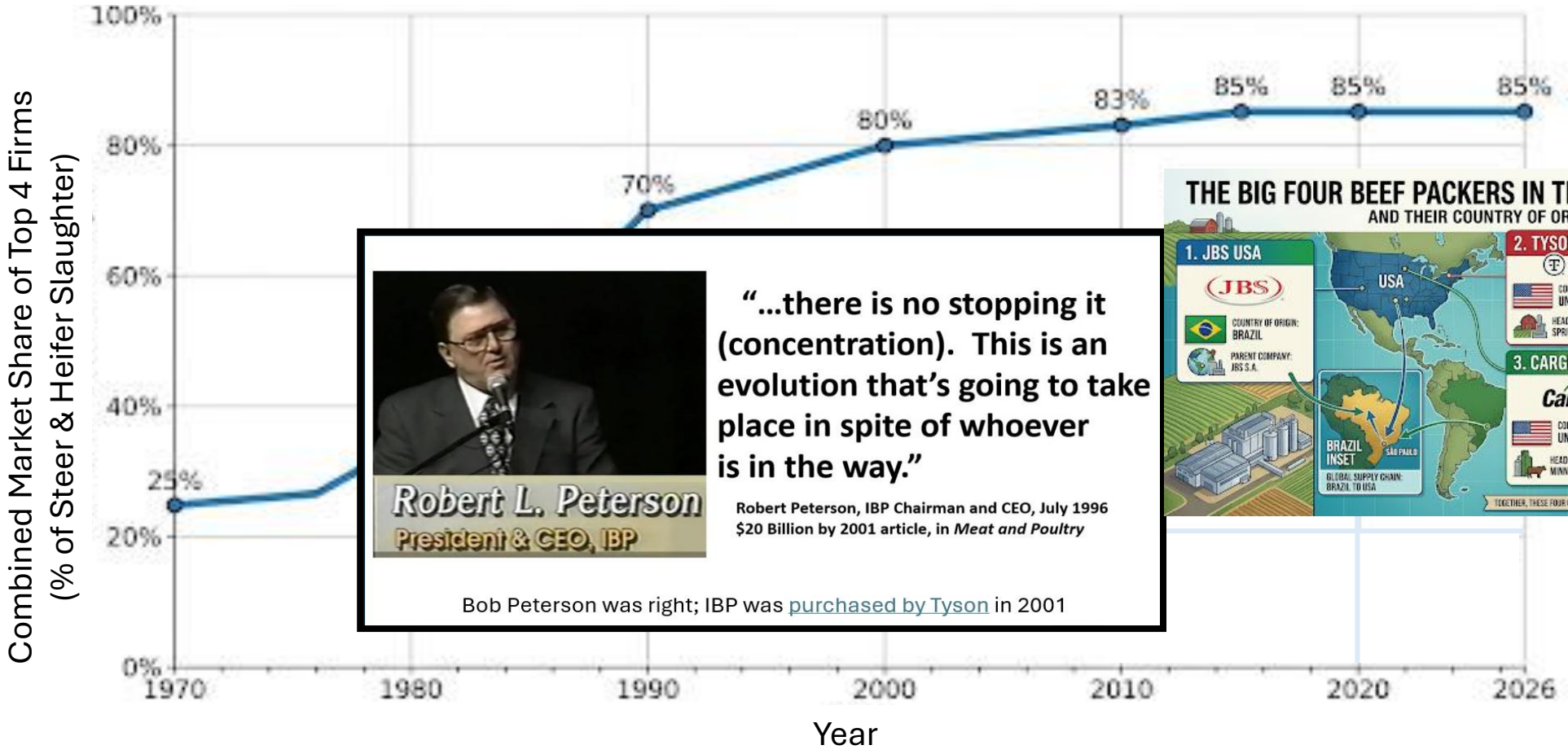
Source: Based on USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) historical data
(Actual nominal prices, not adjusted for inflation)

What Happened?



"… Iowa Beef would strategically engineer the demise of nearly all the small to midsized meatpackers in the country, leaving America with a highly concentrated, dangerous, extremely fragile, and vulnerable meat supply chain." - Vicious Circles, 1979

Big Four Meatpacker Concentration in the U.S. (CR4, 1970-2026)



History Repeated: "The Harvard group advised Hughes and other IBP top leadership that their competitors were also very large. If they could cooperate, rather than compete, they could all increase their profits."



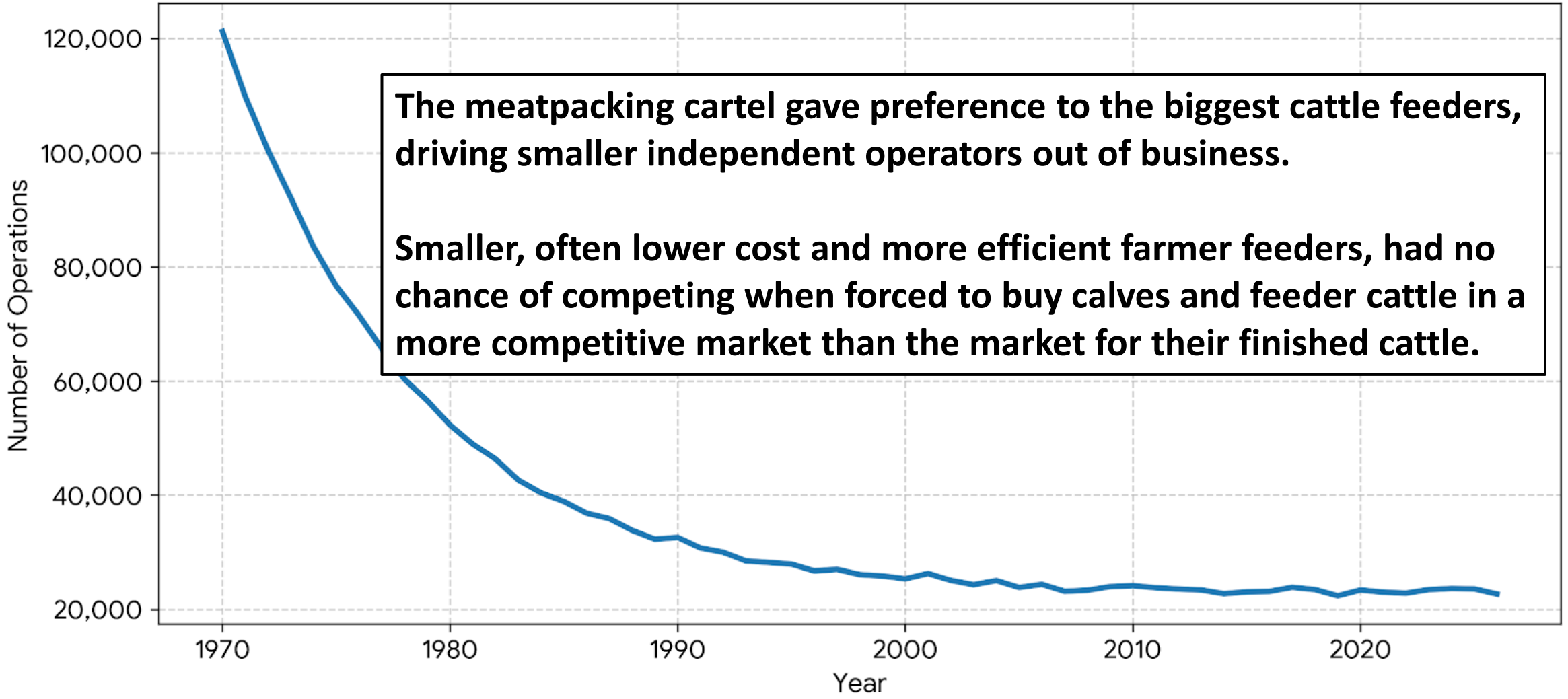
Dan Glickman, Secretary of Agriculture 1995-2001

Question – Why don't you enforce the Packers and Stockyards Act?

"Well you know Mike, in this modern day of globalization, we need big companies that can do business globally."

- January 1999

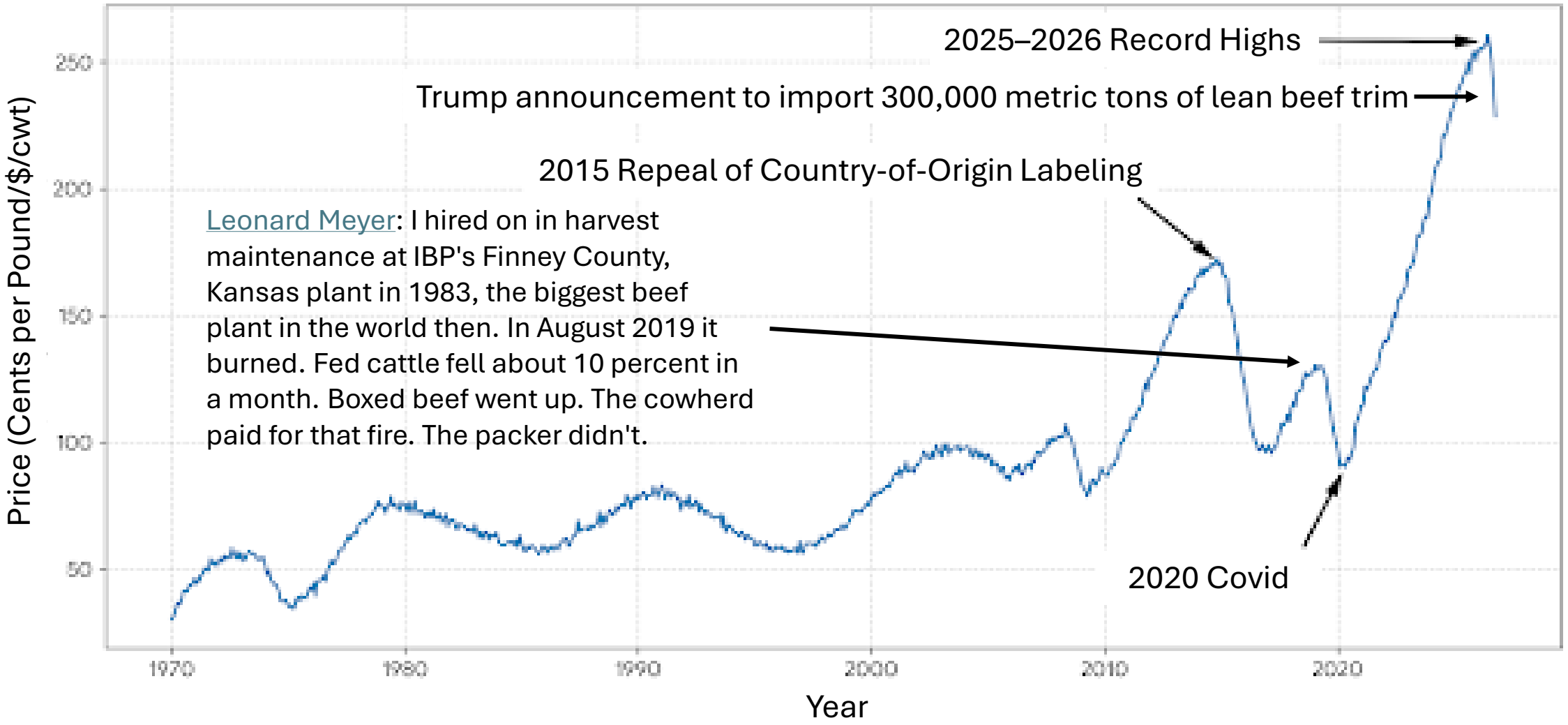
U.S. Cattle Feeding Operations (1970-2026)



The meatpacking cartel gave preference to the biggest cattle feeders, driving smaller independent operators out of business.

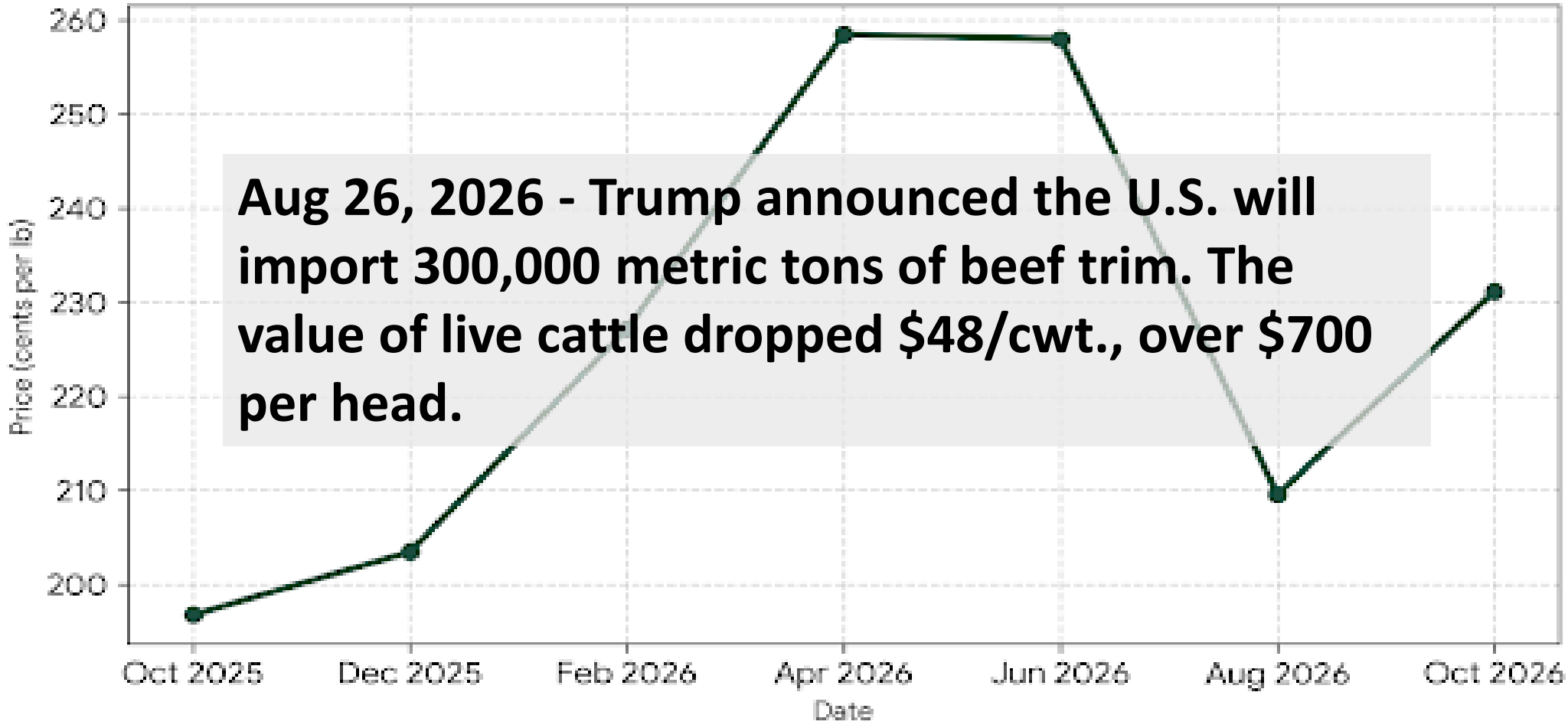
Smaller, often lower cost and more efficient farmer feeders, had no chance of competing when forced to buy calves and feeder cattle in a more competitive market than the market for their finished cattle.

Live Cattle Futures Monthly Prices (1970 – 2026)



Wealth transfer from rural communities to money centers - Over half our cattle producers are gone. In the period between 1970 and 2026 cattle prices have dropped from $200 to $1,000 per head on at least 6 to 8 historical occasions, each time wiping out cattle producer equity and increasing big food company profits.

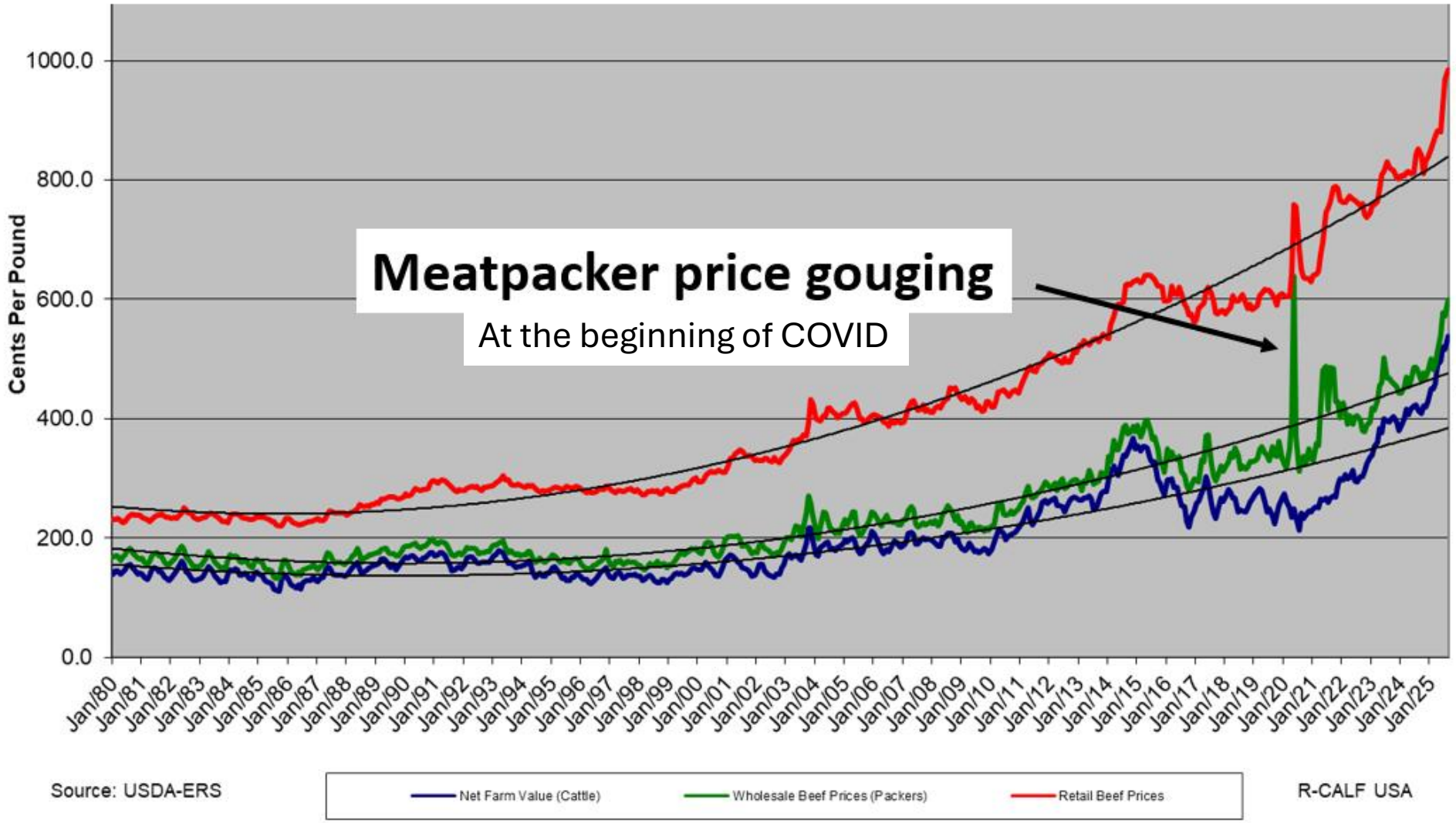
Snapshot: U.S. Live Cattle Futures (2025-2026)



Aug 26, 2026 - Trump announced the U.S. will import 300,000 metric tons of beef trim. The value of live cattle dropped $48/cwt., over $700 per head.

Without a competitive cash market, the futures market (CME) has become a tool of market manipulation, rather than a tool for managing risk.

Middlemen have stolen the producer and worker share of the food dollar while overcharging consumers.

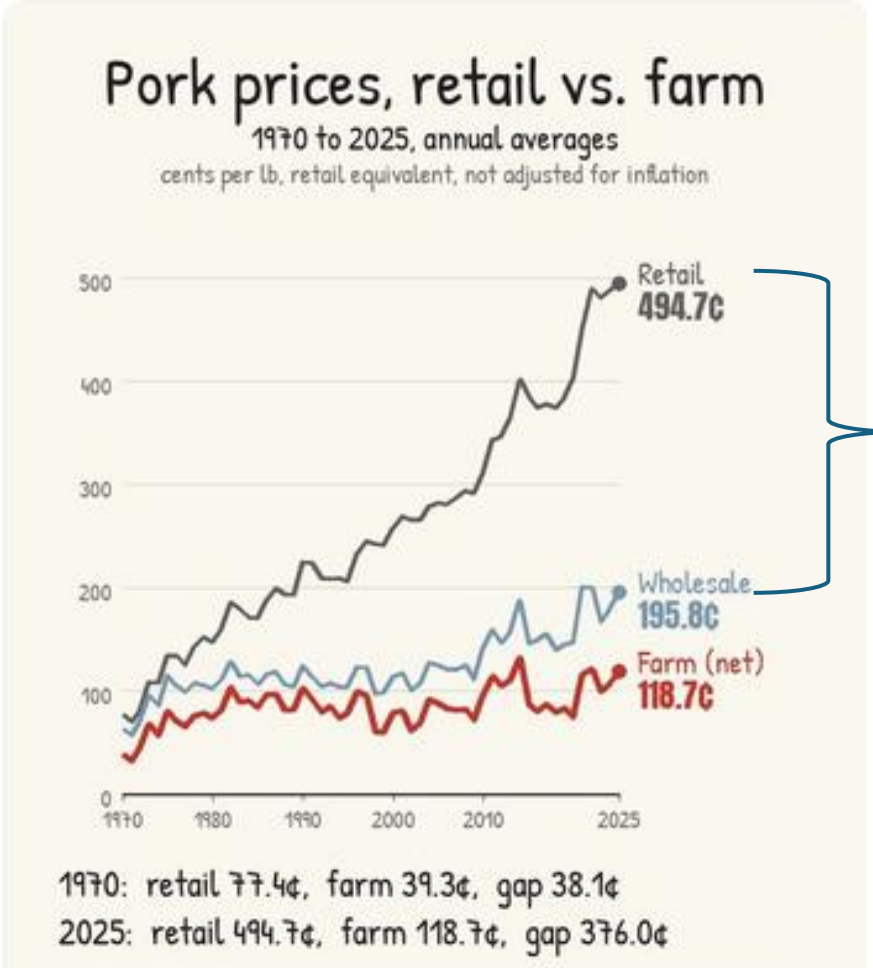


Producers and small processors must recapture a fair share of the food dollar to stay in business.

Retail Beef Prices vs Wholesale Prices vs Net farm value Jan 1980 – Jan 2025

Big retailers are robbing the bank, the big meatpackers are driving the getaway car.





A competitive market would never allow such extreme retail margins.

“Pigs went from the mortgage lifters to the mortgage.”

– Greg Gunthorp



“You should be suing Walmart [Instead of IBP], they are the problem. They tell us what they will pay and we have no choice but to pay you less.”

- John Tyson 2001

There has never been more value in today's food system, but with today's level of concentration, market manipulation, and price volatility, cattle herds cannot be rebuilt?

We will see a growing dependence on beef imports.

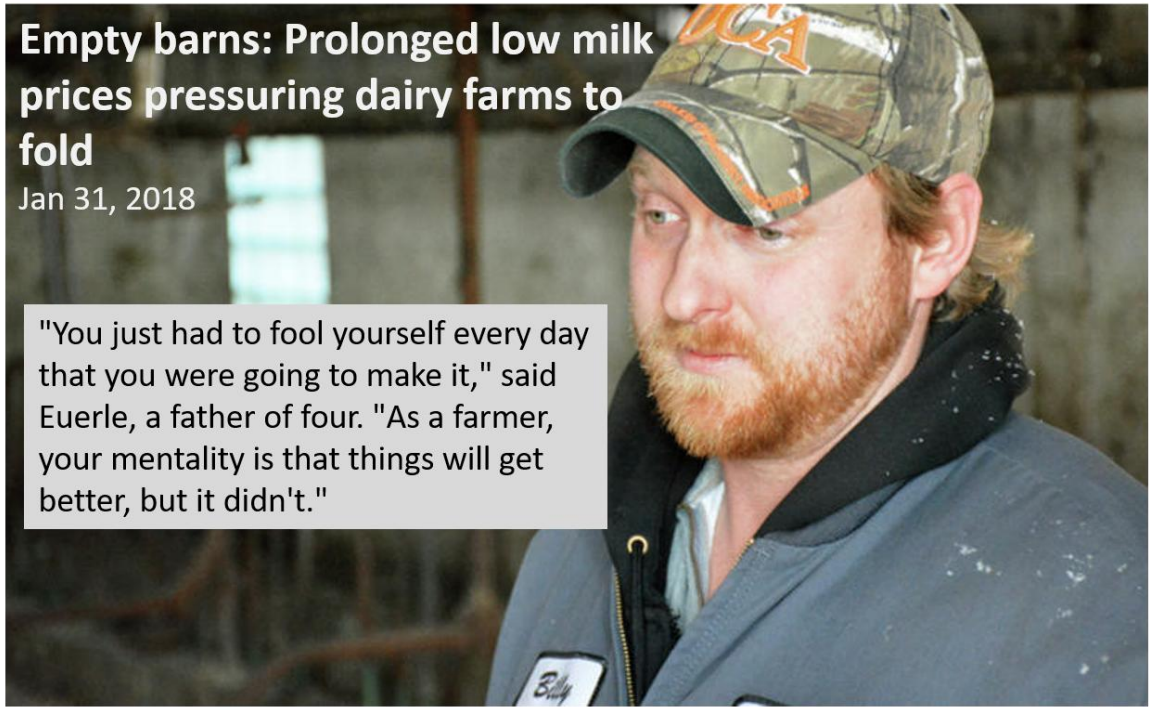
Rural food insecurity has increased from 12% in 2019 to nearly 16% in 2024

We've reached the inevitable end.

Allowing middlemen the power to pay what they want and the power to charge all they can, betrays the people and the foundational principles of a free market economy.

Asserting there's a market when there isn't is misleading, cruel, and destructive.

Unaware he had no chance of success, Billy was simply viewed by industry as another cost to be reduced.

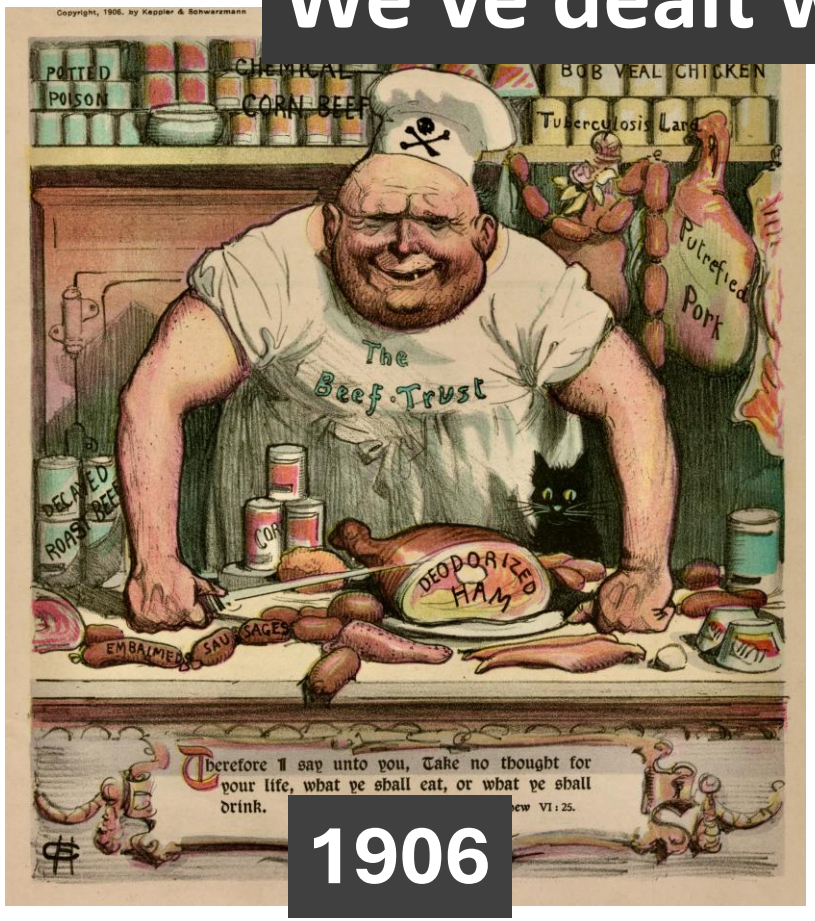


ALEXANDRIA, Minn.—There wasn't really a last straw that made Billy Euerle walk away from his Garfield dairy farm last year.

What Can Be Done?

Who will feed us?

We've dealt with monopoly power before



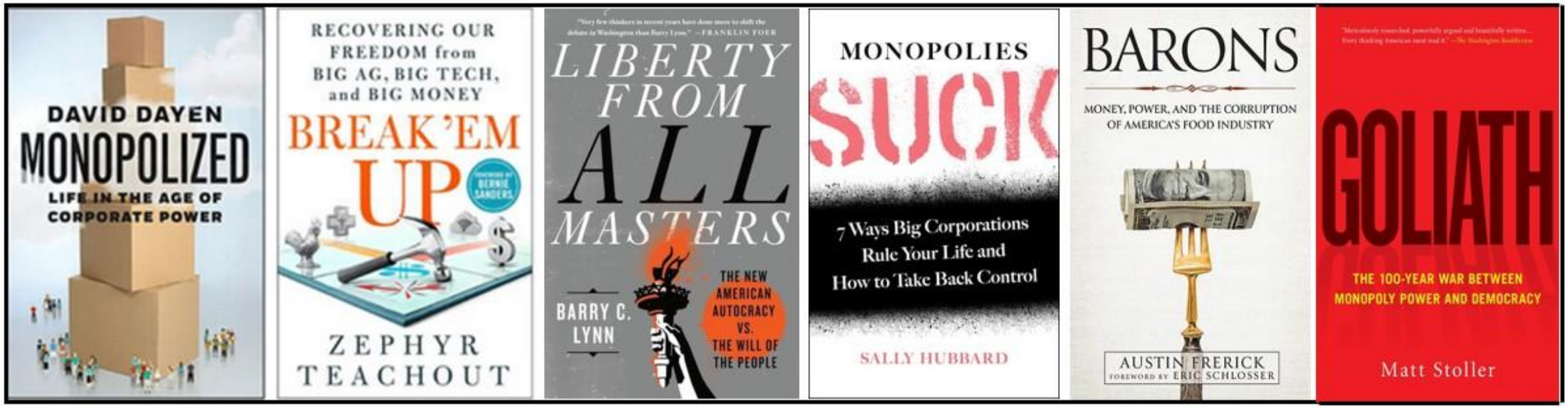
1906



March 2020

"They have their fingers on the pulse of both the producing and consuming markets and are in such a position of strategic advantage they have unrestrained power to manipulate both markets to their own advantage and to the disadvantage of over 99 percent of the people of the country." **– Senator John B. Kendrick 1921**

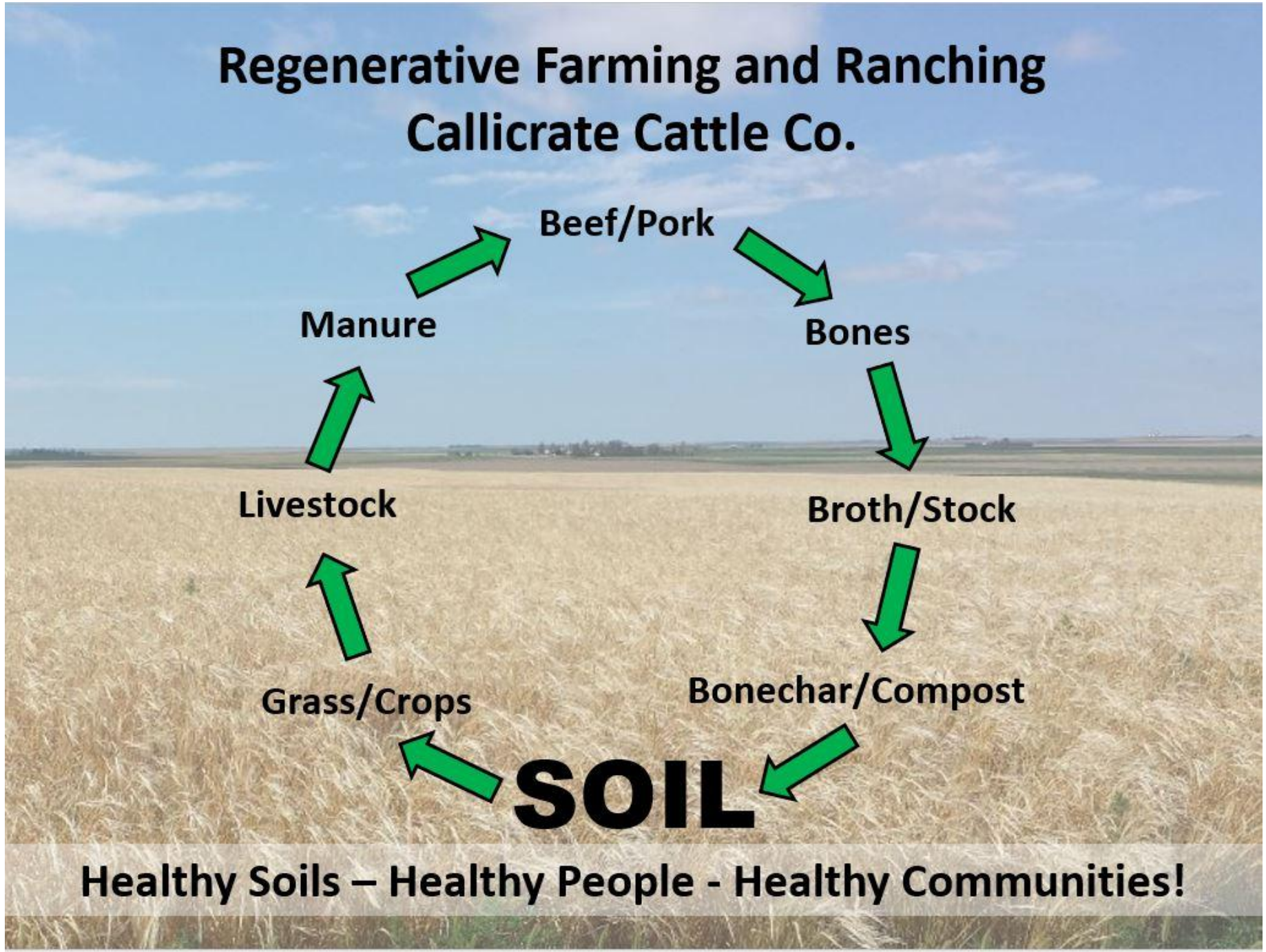
BREAK ‘EM UP



The financialization and monopolization of our food system have robbed producers, workers, and consumers, leaving us poor, hungry, and helpless.

Downsize, Diversify, and Sell More Direct
Feed People, Not Corporations




Regenerative Farming and Ranching
Callicrate Cattle Co.
Beef/Pork
Bones
Broth/Stock
Bonechar/Compost
SOIL
Grass/Crops
Livestock
Manure
Healthy Soils – Healthy People - Healthy Communities!

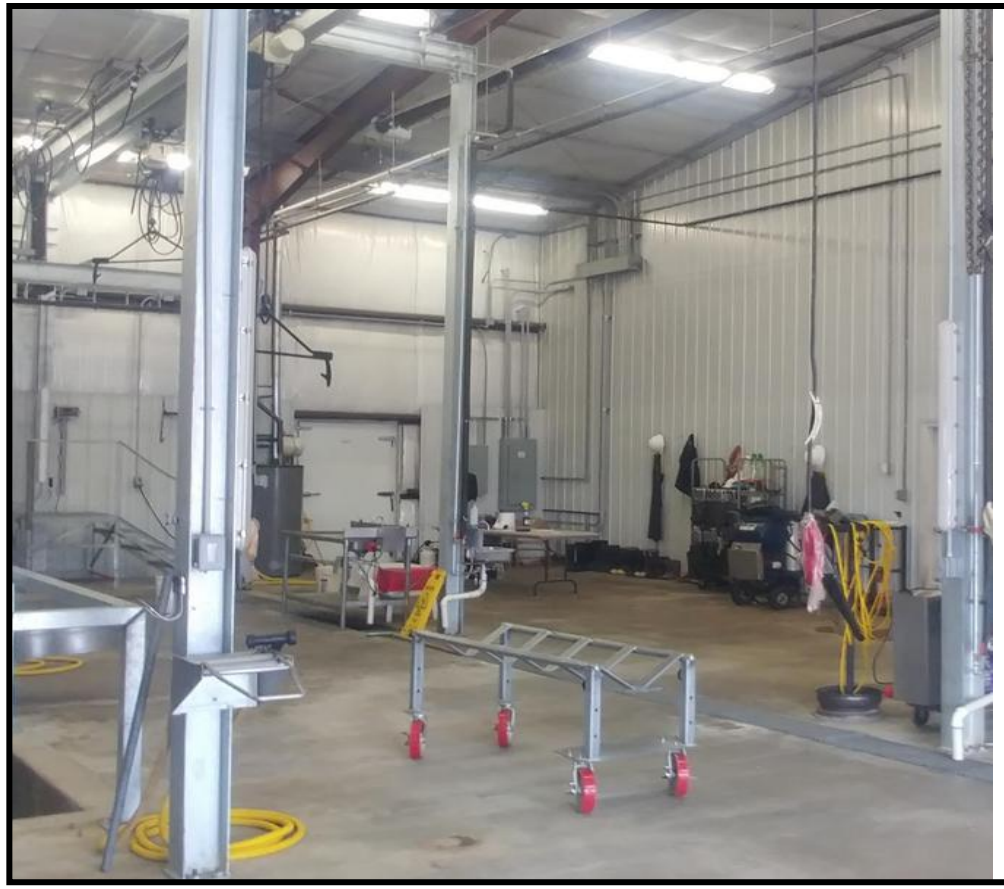
Our Pledge...Our Purpose

- We believe food should be good — and good for you.
- We believe food is a sacred gift.
- We believe our health and well-being is best served with whole foods, minimally processed, free of chemicals and artificial preservatives.
- We believe quantity should not come at the expense of quality.
- We believe food, animals and the land should be managed using sustainable, humane practices that promote the long-term health of rural families and communities.
- We believe food should be produced as close to our tables as possible by people who love the soil and care for the land.
- We believe the people who produce our food should earn a just income.

RANCH FOODS DIRECT
Good food ... that's good for you!

*The green ribbon symbolizes a campaign to support family farms and rural economies.

Build 1000s of new independent slaughter facilities in rural communities where animals are raised.





Process carcasses and sell the meat where people live.



Building Thriving Communities

Around Food and Locally Owned Marketplaces

Maker-Owned Marketplaces and food-hubs provide healthy affordable local food, vibrant community centers, and profitable and dependable market access for family farmers and ranchers.