

Cull Cow Checklist

October/November is the traditional time to sell cull cows, but you may want to rethink this strategy.

Story by
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With increased incidence of drought across much of cow-calf country during the past few years, culling cows to lighten the load on forage resources has been top of mind for many ranchers. And even if you're not being pressured by drought to downsize the herd, chances are you still have a few head that need to "go to town."

How can you get the most income out of these cows that no longer fit your production system? *Angus Beef Bulletin* asked several beef specialists for their advice on making the most of culls. Here are the strategies they recommend.

View culls as an opportunity.

Foremost, says South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension beef specialist Cody Wright, is to view cull cows as a profit-making opportunity rather than a headache. Wright points out that, on average, cull cows account for 20% of the income in most cow-calf enterprises. "So you don't want to ignore them," he says.

In making the decision of which cows to cull, Roger Ellis, assistant professor and Extension veterinarian in the College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at Colorado State University, says producers should aim to balance three primary categories;

production management, financial management and marketing management.

For instance, production parameters are those factors that affect weaning percentages and overall herd production.

"These may include cow age, physical soundness and reproductive ability, all of which may contribute to reduced calf production," Ellis says. "Good recordkeeping programs can be of value in making culling decisions."

From a financial management viewpoint, Ellis suggests making culling decisions based on economics. An example here would

be to market the highest-value females with the highest production costs — such as bred heifers — while retaining cows with satisfactory potential production and minimal depreciation costs within the herd. These are generally productive cows more than 5 years of age.

Ellis says from a financial standpoint, reducing replacement heifer retention may also make economic sense, especially during drought years. However, Wright adds that poor-performers and old cows should be sold first, before tapping into some of these younger cows that offer more potential future returns.

When evaluating market management of cull cows, Ellis says value can often be added with alternative feeding plans, but he advises producers to evaluate feed costs, labor and seasonal market potential.

Be critical in cow evaluations. It's a given that open, chronic and poor-doing cows should make producers' cull lists. North Dakota's Travis Maddock suggests producers put pressure on traits such as udder quality and disposition as well. He says these are often overlooked.

Maddock works as a beef consultant and certified ultrasound technician along with managing cows in his family's commercial herd. He says, "On our operation, we score udder quality and disposition at calving, and then monitor udders during lactation.

Any cows that don't make the grade will go on the truck with the open and poor-doing cows."

Ellis adds that in drought conditions extra culling pressure should be put on cows with late-born calves, late-bred cows or heifers, and any nonconforming or nonadaptable cows.

Consider price seasonality. October and November are when most cull cows are traditionally sold — because that is when most calves are weaned and cows are pregnancy-checked, and it is the easiest time to send open cows to market. But with the extra surge in cull cows at this time, it is also when prices for culls are lowest.

Thus, for better revenues, Wright suggests avoiding October and November if possible. He says seasonal price trends during the last few years indicate there have been some price advantages to selling cows in early summer. For instance, Wright says this may mean that selling cows that lose a calf early or selling early-weaned cows promptly would still put you ahead of most of the cull market.

Early spring is typically another price peak. CattleFax data reveal that the cull cow market has one of the strongest, most predictable seasonal cycles. They report that selling culls in February rather than November has produced an extra \$65 per head on average.

Push the pencil to see if feeding cull cows is economical. Another option to delay cull cow marketing to a more favorable time in the price cycle is to feed cows to add weight and improve grade. For the best gains, cull cows considered for this option should be sound, healthy, and in thin body condition.

When feeding cows, Wright encourages producers to think of nontraditional means, such as wintering them on range (if available) with supplementation, and/or corn residues if water and fencing make it possible. On corn residues, Wright says gains of 1.5 pounds (lb.) per day or more are possible depending on the amount of corn. Strip-grazing in these situations may also work well to spread out the feed period.

With the abundance of alternative feedstuffs like ethanol



byproducts or field peas, Wright says drylot situations to boost cull cow weights and grades may also be economical.

He emphasizes that cull cow diets do not need to be exotic, just high-energy. The target should be similar to the nutritional levels in finishing cattle diets — about 60 Mcal net energy for growth (NE_g) per hundredweight (cwt.) energy with 10%-12% protein.

The number of days cows will need to be on feed will hinge on initial body condition score (BCS) — and if you are aiming for a white fat market, which generally garners more money.

Overall, Wright says to expect reasonable gains in 80 to 120 days. To reach the white fat market, cows will likely need to be on feed a minimum of 100 days.

Other considerations for putting cows on feed include the following.

- Cows coming off a forage-based diet will generally need an adaptation period to a high-grain diet, so work up to a grain ration slowly.
- In a feedlot setting, cows are larger than young cattle and will require 20-24 inches of bunk space.
- Ionophores may be good to add to the diet to improve efficiency. The feeding of melengestrol acetate (MGA) among larger groups can help reduce riding. If possible, do not treat cull cows with antibiotics to avoid drug withdrawal periods.
- Growth implants can also help boost cull cow feedlot performance and carcass weight. Wright says that although no implants are labeled for cull cows, those acceptable for heifers are allowable for cows. He reports that research shows androgenic implants with trenbolone acetate (TBA) tend to produce better performance results than estrogenic implants.

☞ **Avoid bringing in downers.**

Downer cows are no longer eligible for human consumption. Pay close attention to ailments that hinder a cow's mobility and, if possible, get her to market before she becomes a downer.

☞ **Be certain cull cows are open.**

Wright says, "It's not uncommon for pregnant cows to be sold as open. So make sure you're not leaving money on the table. If they are bred, sell them as bred and you'll get more money."

☞ **Don't wait too long.**

Lastly, Maddock suggests there is still time in this cattle cycle to make money on culls. He says a common mistake he sees is that producers tend to hold on to older, less productive cows or even open cows, assuming that a calf down the road somewhere will cover that expense.

Instead, Maddock says, "The reality is that now is the time to be taking advantage of the opportunity to market less-profitable cows at a premium compared to four or five years from now when the cattle cycle has started bottoming out."

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