

THE DIGESTIVE TRACT

Maximize cull-cow value

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



Profitable cow-calf operations can look very different. Some have shiny new equipment and state-of-the-

art facilities. Others have old equipment and minimal or makeshift facilities.

Some of these operations have the most progressive growth genetics and wean off the heaviest calves around. Some have extensively managed, low-input operations and purchase very little feed or forage.

What is the one thing in common among all of these profitable operations? They all bring in more money than they spend. That is the definition of profit — the difference in the amount earned and the amount spent.

Major contributor

One critical contributor to the “amount earned” for an operation is the sale of cull cows. Return from the sale of cull cows is often 15%-20% of returns and can be as high as 30%. Focusing on maximizing value of cull cows may not be the trendiest thing, but if it represents 20% of your returns, it certainly deserves some attention.

The two primary factors that need to be considered are how to identify which cows to cull and how to maximize the value of those culls. First, let’s review and prioritize reasons for culling cows.

PREGNANCY STATUS: Open cows should be culled. With current cow costs, it is very difficult for a cow to ever generate enough profit in her remaining productive lifetime

to offset the costs of maintaining her for a year with no calf to sell. I realize it can be tempting on a young female to “give her another chance.” But, as one of my favorite sayings goes, “don’t throw good money after bad.”

AGE: Cows that are 4-9 years of age are in their peak production years. Cows that are 10 years old and older start to decline in production. As cows age and lose or break teeth, they become more likely to lose body weight and condition. When this happens, cows are more likely to not breed.

DISPOSITION: The threshold for disposition will vary from operation to operation depending



on facilities and how cattle are handled. Regardless, cattle temperament affects people and also can affect cattle performance and productivity. Cull the mean ones.

STRUCTURAL SOUNDNESS/ UDDER QUALITY: Cows with bad feet and legs or with bad udders should be culled. If cows aren’t structurally sound, they will not be able to function (especially in more extensive environments). Cows with bad udders can require assistance after calving to help calves get started nursing. Keeping cows with bad udders in the herd increases the likelihood that the next generation will have bad udders, as well.

POOR PRODUCERS: In well-

Continued on page 44

managed herds, or when herds are forced to reduce cow numbers, producers may identify poor-producing cows as candidates for culling. A pregnant cow in her prime producing years with good feet and legs and a good udder should be pretty valuable. But, if every year her calf is the worst one on the place, you might want to cull her.

Getting full value

Once you have identified which cows you intend to cull, the focus needs to be on how to maximize the value of those cull cows. Here are some keys to getting the greatest return for your cull cows.

1. *Understand the seasonality of the cull-cow market.* In the Upper Midwest and Northern Great Plains, the cull-cow market is typically the best in late spring and early summer. The market is the lowest in late fall and early winter.

This is simple supply and demand. Most spring-calving herds wean and preg-check in the fall. Thus, most

Table 1: Percentage of cows in each grade following a feeding program of shelled corn and corn silage

Days Fed	USDA Slaughter Grade					
	Canner	Cutter	Utility	Commercial	Standard	Choice
0	64	29	7			
50	18	57	24		1	
77	8	21	65	4	1	1
105	0	19	74	6	1	

SOURCE: Adapted from Pritchard and Burg, 1993.

cull cows are marketed in the fall, which causes the price to go down.

Consider early-weaning your cull cows to be able to market ahead of the peak, or consider feeding your cull cows after weaning to postpone marketing.

2. *Feed cull cows to improve USDA Quality Grade.* Most cull cows will be graded Canner, Cutter, Utility or Commercial. The Canner grade represents the least marbling, and Commercial represents the most marbling.

Although there are seasonal and year-to-year differences, generally speaking, more marbling means

higher prices. Feeding thin, lightweight cows adds pounds (lb.) and improves quality, thus increasing price per lb. Number of days on feed can greatly affect USDA slaughter grade (see Table 1).

3. *Feed costs matter.* Feeding cull cows can delay marketing until prices are more favorable, add weight, and improve quality grade. However, if feed costs are high, there won't be much, if any, room for profit.

Sourcing inexpensive feedstuffs is key to success. When corn is cheap, it is hard to beat. But when corn prices go up, consider byproducts and other alternative feed sources.

Remember, profitable operations simply bring in more money than they spend. Given the proportion of the returns that cull cows represent, they deserve some focus and management. Having a plan on how to prioritize criteria for culling and maximizing the value of those culls when they are marketed could be the difference in making a profit or not. |

Editor's note: "The Digestive Tract" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* focused on nutrition for the beef cattle life cycle. Dan Shike is associate professor in animal sciences at the University of Illinois.