

DIGESTIVE TRACT

Making the next cut

by Dan Shike, University of Illinois



Many regions of the United States are faced with limited grazing and feed resources heading into fall

and winter this year. Some producers have been facing challenges for some time now, and emergency feed reserves are depleted. Unfortunately, producers are faced with the difficult decisions of culling cows, retaining fewer replacements and purchasing high-priced feeds.

On a positive note, feeder-calf prices are strong and, given the record culling rates being observed and forecast, feeder-calf prices have good potential to stay strong in the next few years.

Developing strategic plans for

culling cows, retaining and developing heifers, and nutritional management of your herd are key to positioning the operation to survive the current situation and reap the benefit of good prices in the future.

Considerations

Traditionally, pregnancy status and age are the primary criteria for culling cows. However, when feed resources are limited, you are forced to dig a little deeper. The next obvious categories for culls are thin cows, poor feet/legs, and bad udders. Still, more than likely, you may be looking to move a few more cows given the current situation.

The criteria used to identify the next cut of cows will depend primarily on what records you have.

If you know projected calving dates, then shortening up your calving season is a good option.

Additionally, you should evaluate production records and identify cows that have consistently weaned a lighter calf. This is a good opportunity to make sure you keep the cows that best match your resources and have the genetic potential to meet your production goals.

When feed is scarce and expensive and calf prices are high, it is sure tempting to sell a few more heifer calves at weaning than you normally would. Sometimes that is the best decision.

Herd size

However, if you are culling more cows than normal and keeping

fewer heifers, clearly your herd size will go down. When pasture conditions and feed availability/price improve, you will likely want to increase herd size again. This will require either keeping back more heifers to develop or purchasing bred females to place in the herd.

Certainly adjusting your herd size (increased culling and reduced heifer retention) is a fairly quick and aggressive approach to dealing with limited feed resources. However, these are not your only management tools available.

Wean early

If you calve in late spring or summer, you should strongly consider weaning early. Weaning immediately reduces the nutritional

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requirements of the cow and will allow you to stretch those limited feed resources a little further. Research has demonstrated that it is cheaper to feed the calf than it is to feed the cow to feed the calf, especially in drought conditions.

Several weaning ages have been evaluated. The “right” time to wean depends on pasture conditions, feed prices, and calf prices. For some operations, weaning just 30 days early can make a big difference. In other situations, producers may consider weaning as young as 80-120 days of age. The younger the calf is when it is weaned, the more you will have to modify your management and facility needs for that weaned calf.

Match quality, need

For many herds, weaning has already occurred, and they are looking for other options. A dry cow in midgestation is at her lowest nutrient requirement of the production cycle. Grazing crop

residue or feeding crop residue or low-quality hay to this group of cows at this time is the best approach. Testing your forages and knowing the quality of what you have in inventory and what you purchase are essential.

If there is no low-quality forage available, limit-feeding grain and coproducts is a great option. When hay is \$100 per ton, it is typically the least expensive feedstuff per unit of total digestible nutrients (TDN) and crude protein (CP). However, when hay is \$200 per ton, corn at \$6.50 per bushel (bu.) prices in at a lower cost per unit of TDN. Dried distillers’ grains with solubles (DDGS) at \$280 per ton is less expensive per unit of CP than the \$200-per-ton hay.

Obviously, there are several management factors to be considered for limit-feeding in drylot. You need to have facilities, equipment, and management skills to feed cows.

Sort keepers

An additional management practice to reduce feed costs is to sort cows by age class and body condition score (BCS). If you sort 2- and 3-year-olds and cows that are BCS 4 or lower off, you can target your better feed resources at this management group. The place to save feed and money is on the mature cows that are BCS 5 and 6 in midgestation.

That doesn’t mean these cows should be underfed for the next three months, but there is certainly no need for them to get any extra.

Heifer development

Finally, if you do keep some weaned heifer calves back as replacements, you should evaluate your development plan. Nutritional management of replacement heifers is key to their reproductive success. However, research has demonstrated there are several successful ways to develop heifers.

If current conditions are such that

your heifers’ average daily gain (ADG) is lower than targeted over the next few months, that can still be made up next spring prior to breeding.

It is critical you track their performance. If they do fall behind, you need to plan to “catch them back up” next spring.

Beef cattle and beef cattle producers are resilient. When times get tough, you have to step back, ask hard questions and make difficult decisions.

Most producers will be culling more cows than normal. It is essential you know the quality of your forages and understand the requirements of your cows. Sorting cows into management groups based on requirements will allow you to target your resources where they are most needed. ■

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.