



Culling

Considerations

Conducting herd evaluations for culling rely on a variety of factors.

by *Jaclyn Krymowski*

Deciding when to cull an individual or group of animals is at times an easy cut-and-dried decision. Other times, culling requires combing through herd records or finances to pencil out who makes the cut, which can be frustrating, tedious and maybe even emotional.

There is quite a bit of room for opinion and customization when determining culling qualifications, but there are also elements of science and economics to all of this. After all, removing an animal from the herd is not just a personal decision — it is a financial and managerial one.

Resources can offer suggestions about what to look out for, but no one can necessarily teach you how to cull a particular herd. Instead, you can teach yourself how to think and evaluate.

Evaluating the herd

When deciding to cull any animal, evaluations need to be seen through the lenses of economics, functionality and welfare.

For Garth Ruff, beef field specialist with the Ohio State University Extension, the first metric that comes to mind is calving performance.

“If a cow calves on time with the rest of the herd, where does she rank among them in terms of weaning weight and percentile of calf performance?” Ruff asks.

These types of traits are best analyzed according to the top 25%, top 50% and bottom 25%. Putting the data into this type of format makes it easy to separate the high performers from the average to the low performers.

Things shift a bit when it comes to open animals. Bear in mind that according to statistics, cows that don’t settle, or even those that settle later than their herdmates, always represent significant economic loss. Open cows are the primary factor driving the number of calves weaned per cow exposed (calf crop percentage) higher or lower.

Evaluating maternal characteristics

“The Hereford breed has been pretty progressive over the years on udder confirmation,” says Ruff. “Not only udder attachment, but also teat size and teat length.”

Udders with poor attachment or overly large teats are quick to put a cow further behind her contemporaries, he explains. The same goes for cows who are poor mothers or prone to calving difficulties.

“The one that we’re paying more attention to now than we ever have is docility,” Ruff adds. “What is the temperament of that cow, especially when she has a calf? Is that cow able to work through the chute effectively?”

Even in low-stress situations with proper handling techniques, some animals are predisposed to anxiety and aggression. In the interest of safety and effective handling, more operations are deciding not to deal with these types of animals.

Docility is also of interest to potential buyers. For instance, in feeding situations, studies repeatedly indicate performance is

significantly less in more anxious and aggressive cattle than their calmer peers.

Overall animal welfare is another culling factor, even if she is a proven breeder. Permanent issues that will significantly impact an animal’s quality of life such as cancer, chronic illness and unhealable injuries are all immediate candidates for the cull list.

Much of the same culling criteria for cows also applies to heifers. The difference is that culling a heifer means getting rid of one before investing as much in them.

Pregnancy-checking can be an especially worthwhile investment for younger animals. If they do not settle, heifers can still be young enough to be prospects for feedlot buyers. Plus, this eliminates the need to feed them over the winter months.

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Marketing with the season

Also, remember that cull animals aren’t just an unfortunate liability — they are a vital source of profit and revenue. Research shows cull animals regularly make up 10 to 20% of a cow-calf operation’s income.

With this in mind, paying attention to market seasonality can help garner the most return from cull cows.

Two times of the year stand out for the cull market, according to Ruff. First, right after the the beginning of the year. That’s when total cattle slaughter usually declines, boosting fed cattle prices, which also bolsters cull prices. The next prime time to market cull cows is typically in late spring as grilling season boosts beef demand. Conversely, the lowest cull cow

prices usually come in the fall as owners of spring-calving herds preg-check cows.

However, there’s more to higher cull cow values than seasonality. “Oftentimes, the market is going to reward cows in good condition; those with a body condition score of 5 or 6,” Ruff says.

Other beef market impacts also extend to culls. For example, surging ground beef demand and decreased beef imports — primarily a source of lean trim for ground beef — helped push cull cow prices higher during the summer. At the time, Ruff says cull cows in Ohio sale barns were bringing 75-85 cents per pound.

“It wasn’t that long ago we were selling 30-cent to 35-cent cull cows,” he says.

Ruff believes that kind of difference may increase culling incentive, leading to a smaller cow herd, which would underpin stronger cattle prices, relative to current beef demand. **HW**

Sources:

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