Marketing and Management of Cull Cows
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Considering the amount of capital that cow/calf producers have invested in their operations, it is important that they be able to identify those females that excel in reproductive performance and longevity. This will enable producers to keep culling rates and replacements costs within reasonable limits. Factors such as culling rate, cow age, reason for culling, and sale price need to be monitored over time to objectively evaluate these traits. This requires that the operation develop reasonable culling criteria that can be used to make sound economic decisions. Individual performance records are a great asset in determining how well a particular cow matches the ranch environment and must be utilized when making culling and replacement decisions.

Once the culling criteria are established, the process begins by comparing individual cow performance and characteristics to this benchmark. Those cows with obvious physical defects that will only worsen with time should be identified and marketed immediately. Defects such as ocular neoplasia, chronic lameness, “lumpy jaw”, etc. may need to be considered for immediate salvage. These types of lesions are often overlooked, so producers must be constantly reminded that their Beef Quality Assurance Program must cover cull animals as well. The cow processing crew needs to be trained to watch for developing lesions so that the appropriate surgical or medical intervention may be delivered in a timely fashion.

Groups of cull cows that are physically normal should be evaluated to take advantage of potential marketing options that would improve their value. Thin cows that failed to become pregnant during the summer breeding season can be considered for a short-term retention program. Short-term retention and feeding of cull cows should enable a producer to sell a heavier animal at a higher price. This also allows the producer to take advantage of compensatory gain to add additional weight at a relatively low cost. The key to making this type of program work is a plentiful supply of forage or a relatively inexpensive grain source. In most instances, these cows would benefit from a growth-promotant implant.

Due to the sheer number of cull cows that are marketed in October compared to April, there can be a marked price differential. Fall “cutter” cow prices have tended to average approximately $10/cwt lower than spring “utility” prices at Mississippi auctions over the past 10 years. This gives the producer an opportunity to identify these thin, open cows at fall pregnancy check and utilize inexpensive feed resources over the next 90–150 days to produce a “value-added” product. If these cows can gain weight in a timely fashion they can be bull exposed and marketed as a pregnant animal. In our experience, first trimester pregnancies add $75–$100 in value to these cows.

Long-term retention represents an opportunity for the producer to put weight back on these thin, open cows to ensure future productivity. The costs associated with this type of program have to be weighed against the reason that the cow is open and the relative cost to add a replacement heifer. Normally, it is more expensive to add a replacement than to recondition an open cow in a herd that “split” calves. However, feed costs needed to recondition the cow must be compared with the opportunity cost of not marketing the heifer calf. Concerns about propagating poor producing cow lines with the herd must also be addressed. We currently recommend that replacement heifers not be kept from cows that have been given a second chance. These cows should also be considered as a likely subpopulation to test for the presence of reproductive disease (BVD, Lepto).

Thin cows that do not fit the ranch environment, whether due to excessive milk production or maintenance requirements, should not normally be considered for reconditioning. However, we have used this type of program in drought years to avoid the excessive cost and expected decrease in production associated with adding a large number of replacement heifers. This type of program works especially well in herds with both a spring and fall calving season. Another consideration for these cows following reconditioning would be their use as embryo transfer recipients. However, feed resources should not be directed away from pregnant females or developing replacement heifers in order to
recondition these open cows. If the feed resources are not available, these cows may simply have to be salvaged immediately at pregnancy examination.

Marking thin, pregnant cows at the time of pregnancy examination for a reconditioning program represents an opportunity to avoid the losses associated with females calving in poor body condition. Cows calving in poor condition have higher levels of calf morbidity and mortality, lower milk production, lower weaning weights, and poorer reproductive performance the following breeding season. Segregating thin pregnant cows and supplementing them according to their nutritional needs reduces animal competition and allows for better utilization of feed resources.

Cull cow programs in beef operations need increased scrutiny by the veterinarian. This will enable this part of the operation to contribute a value-added product for sale. A clearly defined culling criterion should be established and a record system utilized that enables the producer and practitioner to track why cows are leaving the herd. Beef quality assurance issues should be addressed so that these cows leave the herd in a timely and humane fashion. The profit potential of short- and/or long-term retention should be explored. In the end, cow condition, available feed resources, and the relative differences in prices for the various classes of cull cows will determine whether or not immediate sale is justified.

References