

Culling Cows During Drought

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As producers are preparing for winter after a very dry growing season, culling cows can have a significant impact on the balance sheet. A producer who takes the time to evaluate and make decisions about culling cows can help move themselves closer to profitability.

Culling of cows is usually a secondary thought when it comes to income for the beef enterprise, but research shows they can account for 15% to 25% of annual income. Planning for getting the most for those animals can help boost that portion of income. Cows need to be culled when they retain the highest possible value, but many producers still do not cull until cows are at the lowest possible value.

What brings the highest value for culls? Cutability. Just like our feeder steers and heifer, buyers are looking at cull cows for the possibility to produce a valuable beef carcass. Cows with plenty of muscle and appropriate fat cover will fall into the Breaker or Boning grades and receive the highest prices. Leans are those culls who lack some muscling and fat cover and considered lower cutability and receive a lower price than Breaker and Boning cows. Lights are just as the term suggests, light muscled with little to no fat cover and receive the lowest price of all cull cows as they have the least amount of beef to be harvested.

Producers can use body condition scores (BCS) to estimate which grades their cull cows may fall into. Cull cows in the range of BCS 5, 6 and 7 can fall into the higher price grades. Higher body condition cows, BCS 8 or 9, may receive lower prices as they are too fat even though they have ample muscling. Lower body condition cows, BCS 3 and 4 receive lower prices because they are lacking the desired amount of lean muscle and little fat cover. Emaciated cows, BCS 2 and 3 usually receive a minimal price as they offer little value for cutability.



Cull Cow with BCS Score 2
Photo by Scott Stinnett ©2022



Cull Cow with BCS Score 8
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Although there is some debate in the order of criteria, most research tends to agree on four factors being the most important for culling cows. The agreed top factor is being open. An open cow or heifer will add another year of expenses without producing any income in the form of a saleable calf. In condition of low national cattle inventory, open heifers and open first calf cows are valuable as feeders as they can be finished and harvested before reaching 30 months of age. Mature cows, age 3 to 10 years, in good body condition, due to their cutability as mentioned earlier.

The other top factors for culling are age, structure and disposition. Older cows, 9 years old and older, are beginning to reach ages where any structural and reproductive soundness issues may become quite evident. Bad legs, udder quality, later breeding, dental issues, fleshing ability and more can be reasons these older cows may cost a producer more to keep and lower the profit margin for these females. Younger cows may also exhibit some structural issues or injuries that can deem them candidates for culling. They may also prove to be those “hard to keep” cows that require more inputs such as feed, health care and others that financially put them on the cull list.

Disposition can be sometime the hardest and the easiest reason to cull. Cows who stress easily and show it by either being flighty or on the fight often normally produce calves that are the same way. Research has show that higher stress cattle produce lower quality carcasses than low stress animals. Cattle buyers also notice this if they are brought to the livestock sale. Calm and quiet cattle will bring a slightly higher price than comparable cattle exhibiting high stress such as tail wringing, moving around the sale ring, carrying their head high and other stress behaviors. The cow who is on the fight when being handled can not only be dangerous the people trying to handle her but can also injure herself or other cattle especially in confined areas like corrals, crowding pens, tubs and alleyways. Even though a cow can produce a valuable calf each year, if her disposition is poor, the end result may be a lower quality carcass on her calves.

Timing the marketing of cull cows can also affect their value. There are seasonal highs and lows to the cull cow market. Prices paid for cull cows are on average highest in March and April, better on either side of that time, January and February as well as in May, June and July. The lowest prices are in the fall from late October through December as the majority of cull cows are brought to market. There can be some short one and two week increase in cull cow prices around holidays as packers want to ensure they have plenty of beef in storage for the increased demand during those holidays.

Currently the low national cow herd numbers and world events have provided some higher than average prices for cull cows even though we are in drought conditions and more producers are culling. This could be the unusual set of conditions to make culling cows this fall better than what is seasonally normal. As with any marketing, there is risk involved and producers should do their best to try to receive the best price they can for their cull cows.