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Cull Cow Marketing

One of my favorite classes in livestock judging contests are keep/cull classes. Not only do I appreciate that these classes typically involve data, but also knowing which animals to keep as breeders and which to cull from the herd/flock is a true life skill. The term cull might have a negative connotation, but rigorous culling standards will lead to a better herd in the future. Cull animals have substantial value to the operation, so making the most out of a “cull” is important.

For beef cows, the summer months provide a seasonal opportunity to capture value in marketing cull cows. This lines up well with traditional fall calving cow weaning time and can play into early weaning strategies for spring calving herds. The first thing that needs to be determined with cows near weaning, is which will stay in the herd as producers and who will leave as culls. The current historically low cow numbers, high cull cow prices and ongoing regionally dry conditions give even more reason to work to capture the most value possible.

The four “O” rule should be the gold standard by which a producer makes culling decisions. This rule states, cull your Open, Old, Ornerly, and Odd/Out/Off cows. The first three make good sense at any time, but if numbers need to be adjusted more, the fourth O of “odd” comes into play. These are cows that don’t fit your production system. They can be cows: with a bad udder, either larger or smaller framed, a completely different genetic package, hair coat color diluter, late breeder, bad eye or any other number of things can be considered.

Cull cows generally comprise 10 to 20 percent of the cow/calf enterprise income. Thus, it is beneficial to consider when and how those animals will be marketed. Feed inventories have been strained in the broader region, but if adequate feed is on hand, it might make financial sense to feed cull cows at certain times of the year. Here are a few points to keep in mind when considering how to add value.

- Sell cows outside seasonal marketing windows. Cull cow prices are normally lowest in October through January. If possible, consider marketing between February and September when cow slaughter rates are lower.
- Add weight to thin cows before selling, particularly when cows are BCS 3 or lower at culling. Use high quality forage or grain diets to replenish muscle mass on cows. Target a BCS of 5 for light muscled cows and BCS 5 to 6 for heavier muscled cows.
- Cull old cows before they lose their teeth, decline in body condition, fail to breed or die.
- Sell cows before they become fat (BCS 8 to 9). Fat cows are discounted for low lean yield regardless of their potential to have higher quality grade classification.
- Bids are often very competitive at local auctions, but for some producers it might make sense to direct market to a packer. This can be beneficial for operations who have a good handle on their carcass quality, can feed cows efficiently and market larger lots.
- Don’t forget to keep a focus on quality and safety. Bruising is a major problem with cull cow, most of which are caused by rough handling and hauling. Give attention to withdrawal times when cows have been treated with animal health products.

Remember, the cow is an extremely important part of the total beef cow/calf enterprise, so management of her can affect your productivity and profitability. Keeping a cow in the herd with problems will propagate onto subsequent generations. Oklahoma State University has a good publication that discusses this topic in greater detail. <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/print-publications/agec/cull-cow-grazing-and-marketing-opportunities-agec-613.pdf> Good luck with your culling decisions!