

## Culling Considerations for Beef Cow-Calf Herd cont'd

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In addition, the prevalence of foot diseases causing lameness, such as digital dermatitis (a.k.a. hairy heel warts), are likely underestimated in beef herds, especially in confinement beef operations.

**Poor calf performance:** Complete, accurate, multi-year production records should be leveraged into your decisions for removing inferior dams by factoring in calf performance. Cows that consistently wean light weight calves indicate a poorer ability to produce milk, nurture a calf, or simply have inferior genetics. Care needs to be taken to use production records properly. Calves of first and second calf heifers shouldn't be expected to perform the same as calves from mature cows, and records need to be kept in a fashion that can sort this out. Additionally, a one-time event, such as calf sickness, may occur that has nothing to do with mothering ability, emphasizing the importance of multi-year records.

**Disease:** In addition to disease conditions that result in rapidly declining health, there may be profit robbing chronic diseases to manage, or eliminate, from your herd. This may include cows testing positive for Johne's disease, Bovine Viral Diarrhea (BVD), and Bovine Leukosis (BLV).

**Disposition:** Vigorous calves and protective mothers are a good thing, to a point, but extremely aggressive behavior has negative consequences. Cows with overly aggressive dispositions are a danger to handlers. The heritability of disposition is moderate to high in cattle. Feedlot cattle with more excitable disposition scores have been shown to have decreased body weights, poorer average daily gains, and poorer carcass yield, grade, and marbling scores.

### Herd level decisions

In addition, you may be faced with considerations above and beyond a specific cow in the herd:

- What is your current cow inventory in relation to desired herd size?
- Have you retained a sufficient number of replacement heifers, or have the means to purchase replacement heifers?
- What is the price spread between market cow values and replacement heifer prices?
- Do pasture conditions and feed inventories support your current herd size?

### Optimizing Value

According to the National Beef Quality Audit, market (cull) breeding animals contribute up to 20 percent of gross revenue for beef operations. Despite their contribution to gross revenue, many farms market cows without a plan to optimize their revenue.

Seasonal price patterns have been well documented for market cows. While exceptions can occur due to market volatility, price lows typically occur in November. Peak prices occur in late spring through mid-summer. With the majority of beef herds practicing spring calving and fall weaning, market cow volume increases in the fall as calves are weaned, cows are typically pregnancy checked, and decisions on who remains in the herd are made.

Holding onto market cows until spring has promise for higher prices, but the cost and risk of doing so must be factored in. Having a plan to add weight to thin cows and increase their quality grade can tip the scales in your favor. Body Condition Scores can be used to approximate market cow class and the amount of BCS improvement needed to move up in classification. Breakers are approximately BCS 7 and above, Boning utility (Boner) are approximately BCS 5-7, and Lean's and Lights are BCS less than 5. Lights have approximate hot carcass weights less than 500 pounds.

On average it takes about 75 pounds of weight gain to increase one point in BCS. On the other extreme, overly fleshy cows (BCS over 7) may not receive as much of a market premium and are less feed efficient.

There are risks to prolonging ownership of market cows. Not all cows are good candidates to add condition to. Cows with rapidly declining BCS, poor teeth, advanced age, or health problems should be marketed in a timely fashion, or risk becoming non-marketable and losing all value. Feed inventory and prices must be considered. Yardage expenses and added labor costs need to be accounted for as well.

A strategy sometimes overlooked is pregnancy checking cows in early Fall, and marketing open cows in September and early October. In a typical year market cow prices will be declining, but not have reached seasonal lows. An added benefit to this strategy is it also reduces feed costs associated with retaining market cows.