
COW CULLING - A MANAGEMENT STRATEGY TO STRETCH LIMITED FEED SUPPLY

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A systematic culling of beef cows can aid Tennessee beef producers in stretching a limited winter feed supply. Brood cows are the greatest consumers of feed in cow-calf operations. Research at the University of Tennessee indicated that the brood cow consumed 94% of the total annual feed consumed by the cow-calf unit in the production of a weaned calf.

A 1,000 pound beef cow will need about 25 to 30 pounds of average or better quality grass hay per head per day during the wintering period. Depending on the length (days) of the wintering period, this could amount to 1.5 to 2.0 tons of hay.

In most herds, there are “hay-burners” that should be culled under normal feeding conditions. Under restricted feed conditions, such as drought, culling low producing cows that would take feed from the productive ones would be a profitable practice. Culling cows would reduce the numbers and total amount of hay needed to get through the winter feeding period. It could also result in a little extra feed for the remaining cows and receipts from marketing of the culls could be use to purchase feed for the remaining herd.

A systematic, constructive approach should be taken in culling cows. Following are some suggestions that would be helpful in making culling decisions.

Cull Open Cows First. Open beef cows are a liability. They offer no profit potential, only profit reduction. There are no other options except to cull open cows

during feed shortage.

Cull Older Cows. As cows pass 10 years of age, their productivity and market value begin to drop. Cull these cows before they become a profit drain and get them on the market while they can still fetch a respectable market price.

Cows with Physical Problems Should be Culled. Cows with bad udders, bad eyes, crippled or bad feet and legs should be “shipped.” These cows will only go down hill in production, condition and value. They also create a “poor image” for the industry. These cows are more susceptible to stress and are likely to die before “grass.”

Cows that Calve “Out of Season” Should be Considered for the Cull Pen. During short feed supply is a good time to get rid of these cows. An argument for keeping these cows might be made during times of plentiful feed supply, but not in times of feed shortage.

Take a Hard Look at Late Calving Cows. Calving dates should be evaluated and those cows that calve late may miss getting bred next breeding season. For those producers working to shorten the breeding season, culling late calving cows would help.

Poor Producing Cows Should be Critically Evaluated. This is the place where a good set of records would be needed. If records are available, cull those cows that produced cows with low weaning weights. If records are not available, take a look at the calves with their dams.

Cows that lost their calves for any reason should be considered for culling. Cows that have lost their calves since birth will not produce a return and will continue to eat feed and mount expenses.

Cows that are “wild” and create problems when worked should be considered for culling. A reason to cull a wild, easily excited cow is not needed either in times of plentiful or limited feed supply.

Due to the short feed supply brought on by drought conditions in many areas of the state, marketing some of the cows in the herd may be needed. By taking a systematic approach to culling, improvement in performance could be improved and the result could be a better cow herd as well as improved feed utilization.