
SUGGESTED COW CULLING STEPS AS RESULT OF LIMITED FEED SUPPLY

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Many Tennessee cow-calf producers have taken an inventory of feed resources and as a result are considering reducing their cattle herd. Culling cows is the first option that producers consider. Most Tennessee cattle producers have not been faced a situation this drastic are asking questions about culling procedure.

Before considering culling cows first, market all calves or consider retained ownership and have them finished in a feedlot. If the calves are still running with their dams, weaning them will reduce the cow's feed needs by approximately 50 percent.

The following are suggestions to aid producers in using a "systematic" approach to culling cows and reducing the cattle numbers to come in line with the forage supply. Brief explanations are offered as to why the proposed system of culling is suggested.

1. **Step One.** Pregnancy check and cull and market all open cows regardless of their history of performance. Open cows and open replacement heifers are a liability under "normal forage conditions." They offer no profit potential and only consume the forage that could be available to the remaining cattle in the herd. There are no options except to cull open females and it is even more critical under the current situation of feed shortage. On most farms, this group would consist of a small number but, with limited forage and pasture, a

number greater than normal, may be open.

2. **Step Two.** There are several classes of cows in this group. They are pregnant but, if the feed supply is not adequate, cows in this group would be the next to cull. Following is a proposed order of culling which would include cows with physical problems, cows that calve out of season, older cows, poor performing cows, late calvers, cows that have a poor disposition and cows that are "poor" in body condition. This group could be referred to as either "potential marginal producers" or "problem" cows. Because of these factors, if the feed supply is still short, these are the next to cull. Producers should evaluate their situation and make decisions on order of culling based on their resources.

Cows with physical problems. Cows with physical problems, such as bad udders, crippled, bad feet and legs, eye problems, and arthritic conditions should be culled. These cows will be timid, less likely to be aggressive at the hay rack and not get their share of feed and their condition, performance and market value will worsen over time.

Cows that calve out of season. These cows create problems in management, feeding and marketing even under the best of conditions. With a feed shortage, it is a good opportunity to get rid of them. Why keep problems in the herd?

Late calvers. These would be those cows that calve toward the end of the calving season. With limited feed supply, these cows may be "thin" in body condition and as a result not cycle and bred back on time to be in calving season windows. Culling these cows and those that calve out of season

would aid in developing and shortening the calving season and opportunity to improve management.

Cows that are 10 years of age or older. As cows past 10 years of age, their physical condition starts to decline and, as a consequence, so does performance. As cows age, their market value declines. They may have been “Top Performers” but, at 10 years of age, cows’ best production is behind them.

Poor performing cows. These cows are probably in the lower third of the cow herd from a performance standpoint. They have a calf but, their production is such that they may not be "paying their way." This would especially be true with increased feed cost. Culling these cows would leave more feed for the productive ones remaining in the herd. Performance records would make this process easy but, if calves are still running with their dams, take a look at the calves and compare them to those produced by other females in the herd.

Cows that have a poor disposition. Cows that are wild and difficult to work , create problems with the other herd mates and are a potential cause of injuries to the handlers, should be culled. A reason to cull a wild, easily excitable cow is not needed regardless of feed availability. Some producers will probably have them higher in the culling hierarchy.

Cows that are "thin" in body condition. Cows with a BCS of 4 or below should be evaluated for culling in times of limited feed. They should be in a

BCS of 5 at calving. It will take added feed to improve the cows condition. To improve the cow's BCS one score, the cow will need to gain 85 to 90 pounds. Extra feed will be needed to get these cows in the appropriate condition at calving. Extra feed that the cows would need to be fed to improve their body condition could be fed to the remaining, more productive cows in the herd. A cow that calves in a poor condition will experience delayed first heat until adequate feed is available and she starts to gain weight. In addition, cows that are in a BCS of 3 or below at calving will have calves that are more susceptible to disease and reduced performance.

3. **Step Three.** These remaining cows will be the "best" females in the herd. These are the young (under 10 years of age), pregnant, physically sound females with the greatest genetic potential and less than 10 years of age. These females are currently the most productive ones in the herd and have the greatest potential for future production. At this point, the producer has some difficult decisions to make. The first thing that needs to be done is evaluate the feed situation. How much feed is on the farm? Will extra feed need to be purchased? At this point, producers must compare the available feeding options with the nutritional needs of the remaining cows. If the feed availability comes up short, can extra feed or supplements be purchased? What will be the cost? How long will be the anticipated feeding period?

From a business standpoint, the producer must evaluate the income that could be received if additional cows of the remaining herd are to be

liquidated to the anticipated expense of the most attractive feeding option available.

If only a few cows need to be culled, start with the older cows and work down. In addition, there may be some cows that "don't match" the majority of the cows from either genetic makeup, color and frame size. These would be the final cut before the decision to liquidate would be made.

Summary

Due to the short supply of feed in many areas, brought on by the current drought, culling and marketing some of the cows in the state's herds are occurring. A systematic approach to culling should be implemented by the producer. There may be some producers that will modify the suggested culling alternatives. However, either the above suggested procedure, or one similar, should aid the producer in culling and marketing the less productive cows and "ending up" with a smaller herd of cows that will be younger, improved genetically, more physically sound with improved performance and several more years of production. The challenge and difficult decision that must be made by the producer is dealing with culling or purchasing feed. The bottom line is that if the cows can not be maintained economically, then cull and market them.