

Classes of Cull Cows

In practice, slaughter cows are seldom graded under the typical USDA quality grading system; instead, they're graded according to red meat yield and dressing percentage.

Story & photo by **Troy Smith**

Most cattle folk understand the concept of carcass quality grade. They're familiar with the terms Prime, Choice, Select and Standard. They know those terms relate to the amount and distribution of intramuscular fat (marbling) visible in the ribeye muscle. They probably know that maturity, or the animal's physiological age, also applies when determining quality grade. So they might know the aforementioned grades are applied to carcasses from young animals — fed steers and heifers — but not to carcasses from animals older than 42 months of age.

Carcasses from mature cows or bulls are eligible for quality grades of Commercial, Utility, Cutter and Canner. In practice, however, mature slaughter cows and bulls are seldom graded for quality or yield (estimated amount of closely trimmed retail cuts). Much of the beef from mature slaughter cattle goes toward manufacturing beef rather than retail cuts, so these animals are categorized according to red meat yield and dressing percentage. Terms representing these categories are used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA-ARS) when reporting prices paid for animals sold at auction.

Categorizing cows

"The official quality grades have little practical application in the marketplace, so slaughter cows are categorized on the basis of percent lean meat they are expected to yield," says Corbitt Wall, supervisor of USDA market reporting in Saint Joseph, Mo. "Generally, they fall into one of three categories or classes: Breaking, Boning or Lean."

Or, you might say the classes correspond with a cow's relative fatness. Breaking cows are what Wall calls "fatter cows" — those with an estimated yield of 75% to 80% lean. These may be processed into various retail cuts. Animals estimated to yield 80% to 85% lean are classified as Boning cows and are normally boned for manufacturing beef after removal of a few merchandisable cuts.



► "Cow buyers always say you can't buy a full cow cheap enough," says Corbitt Wall, who supervises USDA market reporting in Missouri.

"Boning cows are your average cull cows," Wall says.

The Lean classification refers to thinner animals with an estimated yield of 85% to 90% lean. The majority of beef from a Lean cow carcass will go into manufacturing beef. Wall says some market summaries may also report sales of cows described as "Light."

"Most of these probably fit the definition of Lean, except the animal is very small, light-muscled or extremely thin and will have an especially low dressing percentage. They generally produce a carcass weighing less than 450 pounds and come under severe discount," Wall explains.

He also notes that price reports may further differentiate cows within each of the described classes, according to dressing percentage estimated as low, average or high.

While it often happens that Breaking cows could qualify for the Commercial quality grade, Boning cows for Utility and Leans and Lights for Cutter and Canner, respectively, there is only a very rough correlation between cow marketing classes and the carcass quality grades. There are plenty of exceptions. Quality grades specifically define meat quality, while the marketing categories describe the functionality or likely use of cull animals.

Premium Whites

There is yet another market class called "Premium White." According to Wall, this classification applies to cull cows that are "pretty young, pretty fat and pretty uncommon." They may yield less than 75%

lean, but their high-quality carcasses earn a premium price. This category's name stems from the white color of these animals' carcass fat — evidence that these animals were on a high-grain diet for a significant period of time prior to slaughter. Animals on a forage diet prior to slaughter typically produce carcasses with yellow fat.

In general, cull cow prices increase as marketing classification improves from Lean to Boning, Boning to Breaking or Breaking to Premium White. However, there can be greater price variation within a class, relative to dressing percentage, than between classes. Therefore, Wall cautions producers against trying to fill cows up in order to temporarily increase total weight. Such attempts usually are foiled by discounts imposed for lower dressing percentages.

"Cow buyers always say you can't buy a full cow cheap enough," Wall grins.

Producers who understand the market classification system should see, however, that opportunity exists for enhanced marketing of cull cows. While a cow's size and muscling largely determine to which class she belongs, management to improve body condition can add to her value.

For example, cows that are thin but have moderate to heavy muscling may benefit from a short-term feeding period that adds weight but also enough condition to move them from Lean to Boning class and a higher price per pound. Seasonal price patterns also favor the practice of putting cows culled in the fall on feed, to add weight and body condition, and target a spring market's typically higher prices.

However, there are limits to how much cow weight and condition can be improved and still be cost-efficient, Wall warns. In many instances, it's better for a cow-calf producer to market cull cows before they become so thin that they are classified as Lean or even Light. Following market news reports and noting cull cow class price differences can help a producer determine a course of action that's best for his or her own situation.



Editor's Note: Corbitt Wall conducted a grading and judging clinic at the fifth-annual Beef Field Day at the University of Missouri (MU) South Farm, Tuesday, Sept. 16. Google "Facts about feeder cattle FC Pub 1000" to access a helpful resource document about feeder-cattle grading.

