

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Culling Considerations

Culling decisions effect overall herd productivity and profitability.

An important aspect of cow herd management is to optimize the number and marketing of adult cows culled from the herd. A survey done by the USDA identified the major reasons for culling as females not being pregnant (open), being old, showing physical unsoundness, having a bad temperament and producing poor calves.

Negative aspects of culling a high percentage of the herd each year include needing more replacement heifers, having fewer productive animals per acre of land, and seeing shorter average longevity in the herd. Culling a high percentage of the herd may be necessary under drought conditions or if a producer is sufficiently rewarded for making genetic progress.

I define involuntary culling as culling due to reproductive failure (being open) or health problems. Open cows and cows that don't wean a calf will generally be culled. Cows with structural (eyes, teeth, udder, feet and legs) or health problems must be culled to maintain the health of the herd and to salvage cows before they lose body condition or become an animal welfare problem.

A sound herd health and reproductive program along with a comprehensive breeding program that emphasizes selection of

replacements with sound legs and udders will minimize the number of cows culled due to being open or possessing structural problems.

Voluntary culling is the removal of otherwise healthy and pregnant animals from the herd because their production is below herd average or they have a poor temperament.

While culling a relatively high number of healthy, pregnant cows because they produce calves with lower value does result in the fastest genetic progress, the negative economic trade-offs of more replacement heifers needed, fewer productive animals per acre of land and shorter average longevity in the herd need to be considered. The number of cows that should be voluntarily culled each year will depend on forage availability (drought conditions), the cost/value and availability of replacement heifers, and where we are in the cattle cycle.

For commercial producers, many agricultural economists recommend herds should cull more deeply when calf prices are low — thereby removing poorer producing cows and replacing them with less expensive replacement heifers — and then practice little or no voluntary culling and keep few replacement heifers when calf prices are high to

maximize the value of the calf crop.

Once a ranch has developed a system for identifying individual cows for culling, the nutritional management as well as the timing of marketing should be planned.

The cull-cow market is extremely seasonal. The highest weekly average cow slaughter levels occur from late October to early December every year, and, not surprising, cull cow prices are at the annual lows during the same time frame.

Spring calving cow-calf producers who keep cull cows past seasonal market lows will sell at a higher point in the price cycle. Still, this higher income must be evaluated against the total costs required to own them for an additional three to five months. Older cows and cows with structural problems should be sent to market before they become too thin or if they are at risk of becoming a “downer” during transit — resulting in both a welfare problem and an economic loss. [A](#)

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.