

# Cull Value

Feed cull cows for premium markets.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

**A**dding a little value to Ol' Bessie before she heads to market can enhance your operation's net income. By feeding for premium markets and changing the timing of cull cow sales and/or cull cow diets, you can improve your potential for profitability.

"The sale of cull cows and other breeding stock can account for more than 20% of gross income in cow-calf operations, so maximizing value before sale has the potential to increase net income," confirms Larry Berger, University of Illinois (U of I), Urbana-Champaign, animal science professor. "In recent years, a market has developed for 'white-fat' cows, which can bring premiums over cutter, canner, utility or commercial grades. But, to achieve these premiums, cows need to be fed a high-energy finishing diet for at least 60 days."

Cows need to be fed a specific diet for 60 days to improve gain and work

out the yellow color in the fat typically associated with a heavy-forage diet. The high-energy program for white-fat cows is similar to feedlot cattle, Berger says, except cows are adjusted to a finishing diet during a 30-day period, rather than the 21-day period common for young cattle.

"The length of time you leave cull cows on a high-energy diet will obviously affect cost of gain," Berger says. In an 84-day U of I study, small- to medium-framed thin cows coming off of fescue pasture had feed-to-gain ratios of 8.3-to-1 for days 0 to 28; 5.6-to-1 for days 29 to 56; and 12.5-to-1 for days 57 to 84.

Berger says poor efficiency during the first 28 days may reflect recovery from grazing endophyte-infected fescue, while the middle month was actually the most efficient for thin cows. By the end of the

study, 15 pounds (lb.) of feed per 1 lb. of gain was required, he says.

## Additional options

"Using Optaflexx® the last 30 days may improve feed efficiency and increase carcass gain for the white-fat market. The diet should contain an ionophore and MGA (melengestrol acetate) to prevent riding and reduce the risk of injury," Berger says. "Mature cows will need to establish a social order within the pen. Often, cows at the top of the order will drive more submissive cows away from the bunk. To prevent the pecking order from reducing the feed intake of submissive cows, 20-24 inches of bunk space per cow is recommended."

Berger also recommends cows be aggressively implanted and that the same vaccination program used for young cattle be used to prevent illness in cows. Treatment for external parasites is also recommended, and all cows should be pregnancy-checked.

"If cows are in early gestation, the fetus will not be big enough in 90 days to justify abortion. If the cow is in late gestation and likely to be heavy in calf or to calve before being sold, then options need to be considered," he says. "You can try to abort the calf, which is not always effective, or calve the cow and sell them as a pair. Or, you can continue to feed them and market them ahead of their projected calving date."

Producers should also secure a white-fat market and confirm premiums. "The major white-fat cow market is in Green Bay, Wis.," Berger explains. Beef from white-fat cows is

**Table 1: Effect of length of time on feed on performance of white-fat cows**

Days	Intake, lb.	Gain, lb.	Feed:Gain
0-28	17.2	2.25	8.3:1
29-56	25.7	4.50	5.6:1
57-84	29.3	2.50	12.5:1

Data is on a dry-matter (DM) basis.

Source: Matulis et al., 1987, University of Illinois.

**Table 2: Typical diets for white-fat cows on a percent as-fed basis**

Item	Days 1-10	Days 11-20	Days 21-30	Days > 30
Hay	12.5	12.5	12.5	12.5
Corn	25	36	49	63
Corn silage	60	49	36	28
Soybean meal	2.5			
Urea supplement	0.0	2.5	2.5	2.5
%CP <sup>a</sup>	12	12	12	11.5
NE <sub>g</sub> <sup>b</sup> Mcal.	51	54	57	61.5

<sup>a</sup>On a dry-matter (DM) basis.

<sup>b</sup>Net energy for growth.

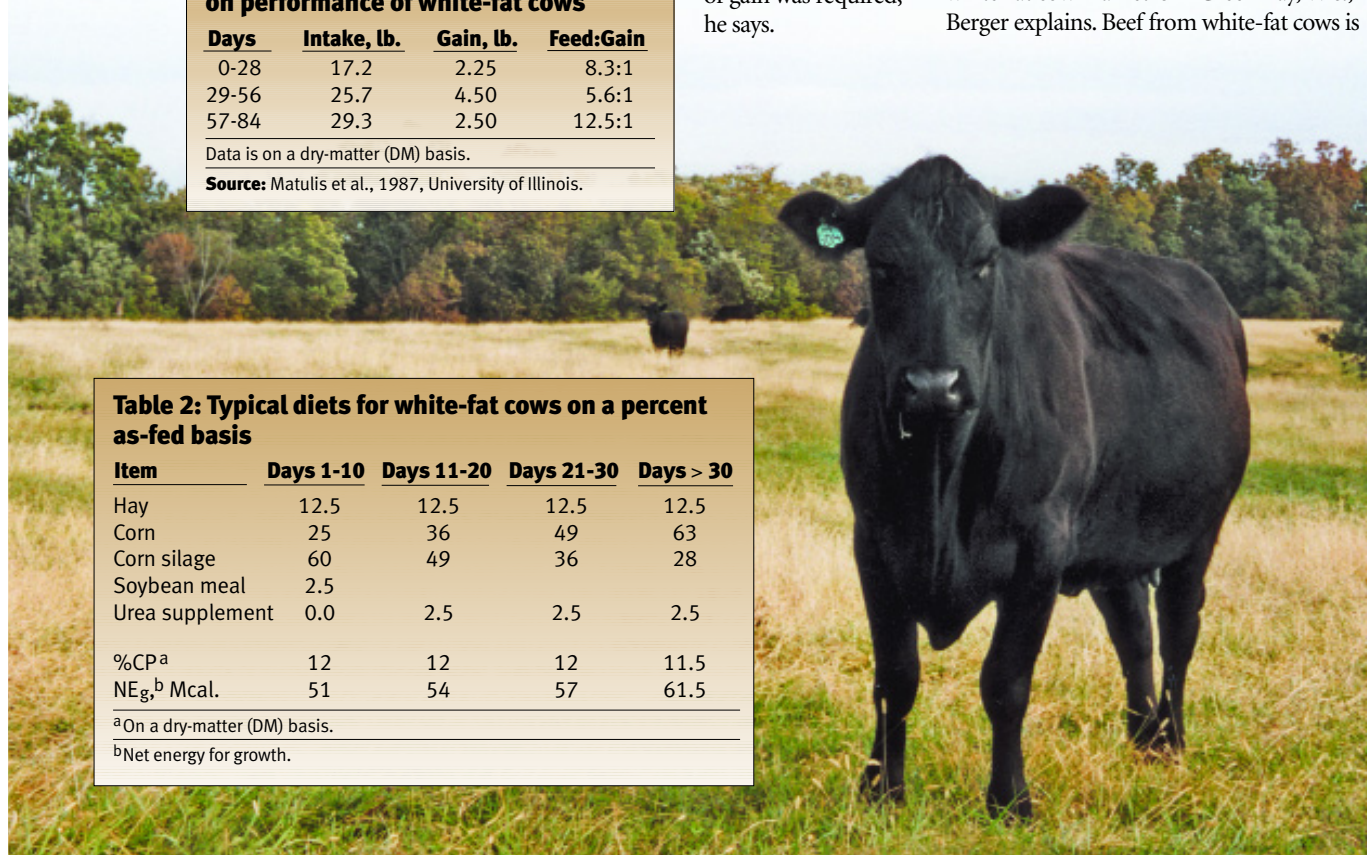


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generally desired in export markets and domestic steakhouse restaurants. “Most local sale barns can point you in the right direction to find a white-fat market,” he notes.

### **Timing is everything**

If you choose to sell cull cows into more traditional markets, Berger says timing is a critical factor. While most cull cows are sold in the fall after weaning, Iowa State University research shows that the average price received increases 12% from

November to February. Peak cull cow prices usually occur between March and May.

“Increasing the value of cull cows by feeding high-energy diets can increase profits as well,” Berger says. “The ideal time for feeding cull cows is when cow prices are relatively high and feed prices are low, so cost of gain is below the selling price.”

Berger adds that some producers can make money by holding cull cows after weaning and feeding inexpensive feeds. For example, cull cows grazing cornstalk fields

will often gain 1.5-2.0 lb. per day with minimal supplementation.

“To maintain this level of performance, producers need about two acres of cornstalks per cow per month,” he says. “Grazing stockpiled, high-quality forages is another program that may allow profitable feeding of cull cows. Harvested hay seldom offers a profitable program because of the poor performance and expense of feeding hay.”

