

Evaluating and Valuing Cull Beef Cows and Their Carcasses

Not all cull cows end up as hamburger and byproducts.

by **Troy Smith**, field editor

If you think all cull cows going to slaughter end up as hamburger, think again. That was the message shared by Colorado State University meat scientist Dale Woerner during the 24th semi-annual Range Beef Cow Symposium in November. Woerner said cow-calf producers might want to think of animals culled from their breeding herds as more than byproducts of their operations and give some thought to how those animals are marketed.

“Twenty percent of all beef animals slaughtered are market cows and bulls — a total of 6 to 6.5 million head,” Woerner stated. “These market cows and bulls represent 15% to 20% of a ranch’s income.”

Woerner explained that just a little more than half of all cow beef goes through a grinder. Of the slaughter plants currently harvesting market cows, all are collecting whole-muscle cuts, which provide steaks and roasts for foodservice, as well as jerky and other processed meat products.

Woerner said market cow values have undergone drastic changes, noting a doubling of value during the period of widespread drought. During the last 10 years, low to high dressed cow carcass values differed by \$130 per hundredweight (cwt.).

Reminding producers of the seasonality of cull-cow markets, Woerner said prices are typically highest from late May to early July

and lowest in the fall, when a majority of producers send culls to town. Yet prices often move higher again during the third week of November and again from late December through the first week of January (see Fig. 1).

“That’s when sale barns close for the holidays and there is a decrease in cattle marketings, including cull cows,” Woerner explained.

Along with considering seasonal price advantages, Woerner advised producers to market cows while their condition still represents the greatest value. He said sound cows with body condition scores of 4, 5 and 6 typically reflect the most value. Cows in poorer body condition offer little potential for harvest of whole-muscle cuts, and animals that are overly fleshy are discounted for excessive fat and lower red meat yield.

Woerner noted how gourmet or premium burger restaurants are catering to the millennial generation’s apparent preference for ground beef. He said he expects the increase in demand for lean ground beef and a decline in nonfed beef slaughter numbers to translate to higher values for market cows.



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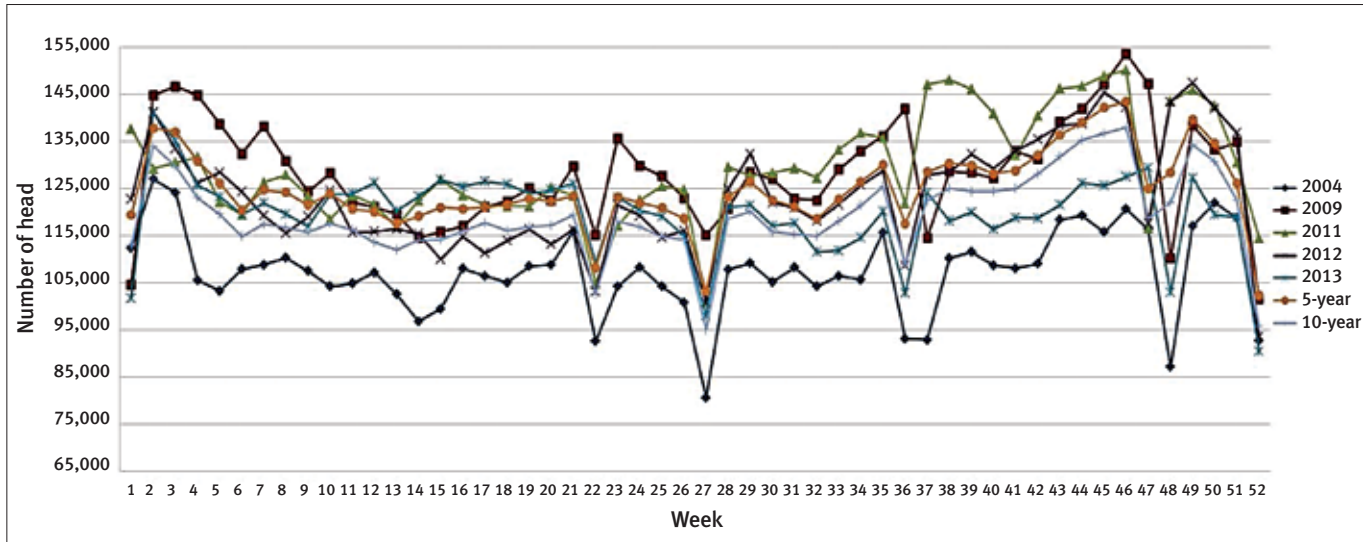
Table 1: Percent of plants fabricating subprimals from cows & bulls

Primal	% of plants
Rib	100
Loin	100
Round	85.7
Flank	85.7
Chuck	57.1
Brisket	14.3

Note: Reported as % of plants that submitted fabrication information.



Fig. 1: Weekly cow slaughter



“Prices indicate we are underproducing lean beef trimmings (used in 90% lean ground beef) and overproducing fat trimmings (used in 50% lean ground beef),” Woerner added. “There is a clear lean incentive for market cows.”



Editor’s Note: Troy Smith is a cattleman and freelance writer from Sargent, Neb. This summary is part of the Angus Journal’s online coverage of the 2015 Range Beef Cow Symposium hosted Nov. 17-19, 2015, in Loveland, Colo. For additional coverage, to review this presentation’s PowerPoint or to listen to the presentation, visit the Newsroom at www.rangebeefcow.com. The Angus Journal’s coverage of the event is made possible through collaboration with the event committee and sponsorship of LiveAuctions.tv.

Table 2: Carcass value, dressed basis, \$/cwt., Nov. 5, 2015

Slaughter cow carcasses			
Central	Lean 90% lean	Boners 85% lean	Breakers 75% lean
500 lb. & up	148-166	130-166	120-154
400-500 lb.	143-164	126-164	116-152
350-400 lb.	133-161	119-154	105-143
Under 350 lb.	113-158		
Slaughter bull carcasses			
	92% lean		
600 lb. & up	150-192		
under 600 lb.	150-177		

Table 3: Classification of market cow

Marketing class	Red meat yield %	Dressing percentage	Approximate carcass quality grade*	Body condition score
Breaker	75-80	High	Commercial	8-9
		Average	Commercial	8
		Low	Commercial/utility	7-8
Boner	80-85	High	Utility	6-7
		Average	Utility	6
		Low	Utility	5.5-6
Lean	85-90	High	Utility/cutter	4.5-5.5
		Average	Cutter	4-4.5
		Low	Cutter	3-4
Light	75-90	High	Cutter	2-3
		Average	Cutter/canner	2
		Low	Canner	1-2