

News Release  
Brent Plugge, Extension Educator  
University of Nebraska, Buffalo County  
September 30, 2020  
For: Around the County

### Adding Value to Cull Cows

Producers cull or remove cows from their herd for a variety of reasons. Open cows are perhaps the biggest reason most cows get culled from the herd. Check cows for pregnancy as soon after the breeding season as possible and if determined to be open then this group of cows, due to economics, should be culled. Another reason that cows get culled is that have been identified as poor mothers, have unsound udders, feet, and legs, a bad disposition, and other physical problems. If these conditions exist, then these cows should be culled from the herd. You should also identify the productive and nonproductive females in your herd. Use your individual records kept on each cow to identify cows that have consistently weaned calves that rank in the bottom 10-25% of your herd. These poor performers could also be candidates for culling. Regardless of the reason or reasons for why you culled a group of cows, there are some important management aspects that may help you add value to your operation.

If you have been selling cows in the fall as your normal practice, it may be profitable to feed cull cows by considering the seasonal price patterns. Typically, the sale of cull cows accounts for 15% to 30% of the yearly gross revenues of cow-calf operations. In the U.S., historic cull cow prices over the past 30 years have been the lowest in the months of November, December, and January; and at their highest in level in March, April, and May. Prices in the summer are typically near the average for the year. Past records indicate that on a percent of the annual selling price for cull cows set at 100% over a twelve month period, prices can vary from 93% in the November-December time frame to 106% in the months of April and May.

Feeding in late fall through February will allow you to take advantage of the seasonal price increase in the spring months. Feeding cows for a period of time can add value by increasing final

weights, but most importantly, improving dressing percentage and quality grade. An increase of 20% in price can be seen when improving some grades. Cows need to be fed starch diets such as corn, corn silage, etc. for at least 60 to 100 days to get them into the white fat market.

Cull cows will need 20 to 24 inches of bunk space and should be worked up on high energy diets just like feedlot cattle to minimize metabolic disturbances. Cows need to be sound, healthy and in thin to moderate body condition for this kind of program. Cows that are unsound or carrying extra condition should be marketed directly to the packer. (Remember that cows need to walk on their own to be taken at the packing plant.)

Research data from UNL and SDSU would suggest that cows can gain from 2.5 to over 3.3 pounds per head per day, depending on the length of the feeding period and the ration fed. Normally the shorter the feeding period, the higher the average daily gain will be. To increase at least one quality grade, cows should be fed a minimum of 50 to 60 days, but not over 100-110 days. If fed over 100 to 110 days, feed efficiency and rate of gain generally declines, as well as the risk of excess body condition on the cows which can cause these cows to be discounted in price.

Grazing cows on corn stalks and or windrow grazing annual forages along with a supplementation program is also an option. Weight gains of 2.0 to 2.5 pounds per head per day can be realized. If no supplementation is provided, weight gains of 1.5 pounds per head per day could be expected.

The sale of cull cows can represent a substantial percentage of the annual income on any cow-calf operation and should not be overlooked when it comes to marketing this class of animal. Cull cows are not very efficient and all possible management strategies need to be explored (such as ionophores, implants, etc.) with a well-planned feeding regime and a balanced ration that will meet the requirements of the desired average daily gain. With a carefully managed program in place, feeding cull cows can add dollars to the bottom line in a cow calf operation.

## Resources

Information for this article came from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (Rick Rasby, Rick Funston, Dennis Bauer, Cody Wright, and Dillon Feuz) and South Dakota State University.