

Tips for Strategic Culling, Cow Body Condition Scoring and Replacement Selection

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High supplemental feed costs, and in some areas persistent drought, should motivate producers to evaluate their feed resources and management plans heading into the fall and winter months. One major priority for many producers is evaluation of ways to minimize supplementation of cows with harvested feedstuffs, either hay, by-product feeds or coarse grains. One certain way to reduce the overall nutrient requirements of the herd is to cull out unproductive animals. As you begin processing cattle to wean calves consider spending a little extra time to identify ‘problem’ cows by evaluating them for pregnancy status, udder quality, and adequacy of teeth and feet structure.

Open cows should be marketed in a timely fashion to reduce nutrient demand if you are in a drought condition, however, if the open cows are thin and you have grazing pasture or feedstuffs available consider feeding to cows to regain some condition before marketing as this will generally increase sale weight of cows and the price received for them. Cull cows with poor udder quality or dry quarters, cows with no or worn teeth and cows with damaged hooves or poor foot structure. If you find that you need to further reduce your cow inventory due to drought do it in a strategic way.

Strategic culling plans should be developed to first cull cows that are least productive to conserve as many ‘good’ cows expected to be entering their prime producing years as possible. Conserving cows that are expected to be most productive will set up future marketing opportunities of future calf crops on markets that are expected to be short on supply and strong on demand resulting in high calf prices. The ‘problem’ cows mentioned above should be followed by old cows that are at or near the end of their productive life. Next, consider selling open and bred replacement heifers. Culling these females, although they represent the newest genetics in your herd, will reduce overall herd nutrient demands above just maintenance requirements as they are still growing. Due to short supplies of breeding females in the marketplace these heifers, so long as they are in good body condition, should generate significant sale proceeds.

Fall processing also presents a great opportunity to evaluate the mature weights and body condition scores of your cows. This can be a key piece of management information for successful supplementation and carrying of cows through winter to maintain body condition prior to calving. Cow body condition scoring is easy to do and requires little time. If you find many cows are thin, begin making plans for supplemental nutrition. If only a few cows are thin, usually first or second parity cows or older cows, consider separating the herd into two groups forming one group with adequate condition and another group with low body condition. Partition your supplementation to favor the thin cows and thereby limit overfeeding of cows in adequate condition. At the end of the day, you may use just as much feed as if feeding the whole herd together, but the cows that need some extra groceries are sure to get it when fed separately.

The large size of many cows is becoming a bigger concern for many producers. To properly evaluate the size of your cows, you should adjust their weights for both age and body condition. The Beef Improvement Federation provides guidelines on adjustments of these records to a constant body condition score of five. As a general rule, each full score is equivalent to approximately 80 of live weight. For example a 1,200 lb. cow in condition score 4 would adjust to a 1,280 lb cow at condition score 5.

Mature weights should be used in computing nutrient or forage requirements for the coming months to assure you'll have adequate feed on hand. Additionally, these cow weights can be used to gauge the direction you need to take in selecting replacement females. If your cows are bigger than you would like to fit your environment, consider selecting replacement heifers from the middle part of the weight distribution. Keeping the biggest, fleshiest heifers from your herd over time contributes to increases in mature cow weights and increased nutrient demand. You should use age of dam adjusted 205 d. weaning weights to classify your heifers' potential for growth. The adjustment procedures remove bias due to age of calf and age of dam at weaning. Contact me for a handy spreadsheet to compute adjusted weaning weights.

Use of these tips should help manage limited forage resources, reduce supplement feed costs and in the long run decrease your herds nutrient requirements. Please contact your extension faculty for more assistance or information on these topics.