

ON TARGET



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Add value by culling, feeding

Weaning and “preg checking” tell us how successful our last two breeding seasons were. While many cow herd operators enjoy calving as a time to see the fruits of their labor, I prefer weaning, when management and genetic selection come together in one package. If you fell short in meeting any challenge like keeping pastures vegetative or replacement heifers without records, those effects are in full view when calves cross the scale at weaning.

On the positive side, if calves weigh and look at least as good as expected, we’re already fully invested in these genetics. The cows should be rebred and plans to ensure adequate fetal nutrition can begin. One key decision at weaning is how committed we are to the cows we already have. Nobody tries to maintain a below-average herd, yet the simplicity of math suggests half of every herd is below average.

Weaning data and pregnancy diagnosis results present opportunities to raise the average by removing some bottom-end and/or late-bred cows. Culling the bottom 10% by weaning performance and probable calving date will raise the average, just like selecting a better sire or replacement heifer. It’s also one of the fastest paths to genetic improvement because impacts are immediate: those calves will not join your herd next year.

The need for commercial cattlemen to keep detailed records is often debated, but it makes sense to at least write down the calf weaning weight for each cow and estimated days bred. After you cull for failing to conceive, advancing age, declining udder quality and inappropriate disposition, how many pregnant but low-producing cows are you willing to move out of the herd? That answer links to another: How many above-average bred heifers are entering the herd this fall?

National Animal Health Monitoring Systems (NAHMS) data put culling and replacement rates for the U.S. beef cow herd at 15% to 20%, which are comparable to the average culling rate and share of gross sales cull cows contribute to those herd enterprises. If you have a plan to improve genetics in the herd, and the bred heifers to prove it, there’s nothing wrong with culling more deeply.

Adding value to cull cattle is probably not your main goal, but it is an opportunity likely to beat selling all culls in the fall. Short-bred cows that would calve too late to catch up to others can stay with the herd on your regular feed until an early spring sale. Feeding the open cows to capture compensatory gain while moving to a more favorable marketing window typically pays. Cows—even first-calf heifers that don’t breed back—are generally too old to qualify for the Certified Angus Beef brand. Yet quality beef production doesn’t have to be limited to the calves.

You hear a lot about feeding cull cows in the fall, but rarely find commentary on the greatest value-added, quality beef production model: finishing the failed replacement heifers. Results usually capture profit and your attention because of premium grading. As I looked at several sets of carcass data recently, comparing results and carcass values to the price I received for heifers that failed to conceive, the opportunity was clear. You could retain ownership, add value and capture carcass premiums, especially with an early pregnancy diagnosis.

Replacement heifers are the top cut of heifer calves that are supposed to become the next generation of cows destined for higher quality beef production. No one plans for them to remain open, yet we all have some that fail. Today we have many more options to diagnose their status earlier, which is important because it can improve quality on both the open and pregnant heifer.

Sorting the open heifers off earlier lets them move on to the feedyard where compensatory gain makes for fast and efficient finishing. With age on their side, the gender more typically subject to discounts for light carcasses can push the limits of carcass weight due to advanced frame development. In herds where carcass merit is a focus, these heifers can be sold on a grid to capture market premiums not often realized by commercial cattlemen selling calves at weaning. These older heifers tend to have fewer health problems than older or younger calves, and there are few issues with soundness.

You wouldn’t build your program around this feeding niche, but the opportunity to add value to cattle that represent your most current genetics and management may be too good to overlook.

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