

Marketing Cows

It's that time of year when we see cowherds moving out of pastures, working calves, preg checking spring calving cows and deciding which cows to cull.

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.

If you have been selling cows in the fall as your normal practice, it may be profitable to feed cull cows by considering this seasonal price pattern. 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 also add value by increasing final weights, but most importantly, improving dressing percentage and quality grade. A 6% to 20% increase in price can be expected when improving grades.

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.

Research data from Nebraska and South Dakota 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.

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.

If you would like some help developing a cull cow ration, give me a call!