

Managing Cull Cows Following Pregnancy-Check

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Cull cows are often considered a nuisance to be dealt with as soon as possible. The misconception is farmers should not keep cull cows since they are not producing calves and, therefore, are a cost which should be unloaded as soon as possible. This class of cattle, however, represents a tremendous opportunity to add value to many operations. University of Minnesota and South Dakota State University studies have shown the top 20% of the most profitable farmers receive 15-30% more for their marketed cull cows than the remaining 80%. The question is – how do they do this?

Due to common misconceptions, most farms will market cull cows immediately after they are pregnancy-checked. Unfortunately, cull cow prices in the fall are the lowest of the season since the market is completely saturated. Research shows opportunities exist for farmers to add fleshiness and weight to cull cows before marketing to increase weight and fat cover on the animals. Successful management of cull cows headed to market requires at least a fundamental understanding of how cows are priced at the sale barn or the packing house.

Aged cows being sold for slaughter are scored based on live weight which determines the base price. Premiums or discounts are assessed based on fleshiness and fat cover. For example, a big framed cow may weigh quite a bit due to her frame size, however, if she has a lack of flesh and fat cover it will be frowned upon by buyers compared to a cow with more cover. Additionally, overly fat cows may or may not be desirable depending on market needs. Therefore, to be successful in marketing culls, farmers must be able to assess market value of flesh and fat cover compared to the cost to add flesh and fat cover. Market relationships change constantly, so occasionally it pays to add weight to a cull cow. Fortunately, cull cows have potential to gain a tremendous amount of weight in a relatively short amount of time and can convert feed very efficiently, giving farmers the option of taking advantage of favorable market conditions quickly (30-45 days). Farmers should assess market conditions and add weight and fat cover to cows at a rate matching the most profitable market prices.

As a result, managing cull cows and feed costs can make the difference between adding profit to your bottom line versus just selling a cow. The most important management question is generally how best to feed cull cows, which depends on your ultimate goal. The most common management strategy with cull cows is to turn them back out on well-grazed pastures until they can be taken to market. This is probably not the best way to add value unless there is an economic reason for them not to gain any weight (sometimes there is).

A cheap way to add weight and cover to cull cows is to graze them on a forage crop or cover crop. Summer annual forage crops, like millet or sorghum, can be direct-seeded to provide significant tonnage for late-summer and early-fall grazing. Foxtail millet or Japanese millet are generally good options for one-time grazing events.

Short-season forage sorghums can work well in dry or sandy soils. Farmers can also consider planting a short-season corn on heavier soils to generate late-season grazing. Cover crops such as brassicas, ryegrass, and cereal grains can be seeded following cereal cash crops or overseeded into standing corn to be chopped for silage at minimal cost. The type of forage crop only needs to fit the production system and provide some reasonably good quality roughage. Some farmers will clean up hay field regrowth and/or frost-damaged alfalfa with cull cows.

What is the real advantage to these scenarios? Feed is relatively cheap and the cost of gain is usually kept under 50¢/lb. The drawback is it can take 60 days or more to add any significant weight and cover. This generally rolls them over to the first of the year, when a decision will have to be made to either market them or put them on a hotter diet and push for an early March sale. Economics and feed supply will dictate the course of action.

The other option is to bring cull cows into the yard and start feeding them a diet to put on weight quickly and efficiently. Again, economics and feed supply will determine the best approach. However, if reasonably high quality grazing is not available, this is about the only option remaining to keep cost of gain under 70¢/lb.

For more information about managing and marketing cull cows and assessing signals in the cow market, download the cull cow value calculator at www.extension.umn.edu/beef.