



The Value of Cull Cows

It has been said that if you are in the beef cow business, you are in the cull cow business. This is an important aspect of your operation to remember because you are either selling cows at some point or they are adding up as death loss on your operation. Sales of cull cows can add up to 15-30% of the gross revenue on a cow-calf operation each year.

While the vast majority of us do not think of ourselves as cull cow producers, they are an aspect of a cow-calf operation that shouldn't be ignored. There are a number of ways to market cows that no longer fit our breeding herd while still selling something of value.

One way of marketing the cull cows is to sell 'late calvers' that are no longer in the calving window that you want for your operation. Maybe she is still a young, bred cow but if she is calving late during your calving season, selling her may help you get more value for her and keeps your calving window tighter, allowing you to consolidate your labor during calving. Is the cow still productive? It appears so, but if she is late this year, there is a good chance she will be open next year and a bred cow is usually worth more than an open cow. She might fit someone else's calving season better and be productive for their operation, so it creates a win-win situation.

You can sell open cows right after pregnancy testing and hopefully hit the cull cow market at a better time of the year. The cull cow market is typically higher in the spring months and lowest in the late fall and winter months. If you can sell them in August or September, you can probably get more money for those cows at a time when beef for grinding is less readily available. It also reduces the cost you have put into those cows when you don't have to feed them for several months. Early weaning the calves off cull cows allows them to raise the calf but still allows you to capture the value during a better market.

Keep in mind that another option is to get the cows eating grain and sell them as fat cows. Adding weight to cows doesn't have to be labor intensive and can be worthwhile the current market. Cull cows are typically fed grain for at least 70 days to make sure that they are considered 'white fat' cows. When cows are on grass, they accumulate a lot of beta-carotene which concentrates in the fat and makes the fat very yellow to orange colored. By feeding grain, we can change the fat color to white like we see in young, finished cattle.

In the situation where you may have a number of cull cows, adjusting them to grain and then transitioning them onto a self-feeder can be a fairly easy method of adding weight without adding more chores. The AR Finisher 44 product is designed to be mixed at 10% with 90% cracked corn. After acclimating the cows to grain over about 2 weeks, you can let them go on the self-feeder. Some kind of roughage needs to be available. The better quality the forage is, the less their intake of the grain mix will be. This program makes more sense when the corn price is relatively low and the cattle price is higher, like it is now.

Selling middle-age pairs is an option to consider, as well. Selling 2nd or 3rd calvers could be a long-term strategy for your operation. These cows with a calf at side are typically the highest value animals on spring sales. If you can manage your herd to keep a certain number of heifers until you get to this point, you could consistently plan on that being part of your operation. Selling first-calf heifer pairs could be another strategy. The lack of labor in the beef industry means that if you have the ability to calve out cows, you can capitalize on selling pairs because you have already done the hard part. It enables you to capture the value of selling a \$3,500 pair instead of getting \$1,900 for an average cull cow.

In a Nutshell:

- **Revenue from cull cows might be 15-30% of gross**
- **Consider marketing cows before they are open**
- **Selling opens early may hit a high market**
- **Early weaning of calves allows early selling of culls**
- **Add weight to open cows and sell as fat cows**
- **Self-feeder programs can work for cull cows**

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In reality, we want to be able to sell every animal on our operation at some point. Often, we wait until the cow has reached the very end of her productive life and the value we get for her reflects that. If we can figure out a way to get more for that cow, it will have a significant impact on our bottom line. We have cull cows to sell every year and we know that. Putting some thought into how we do that could potentially pay dividends. That won't look the same for each operation, but it is worth exploring.

Roxanne Knock, PhD

What do you need to be thinking about this time of year?

- Get your creep feeders in shape to put out in pastures and **get creep feed out for spring-born calves**
- Keep mineral in place for the cows on pasture
- Feed **Altosid** to control horn fly populations
- Implant calves at branding time
- Be prepared for heat stress for cattle in the lots— stock shades, sprinklers, extra water tanks, etc.
- Ask about Intense Calf WSC mixer for orphaned calves
- Order wasps for feedlot fly control or ask about **ClariFly®** for feed-through fly control in the feedlot
- Make sure the bulls have mineral, too! Stress Tubs or Ultimate Breeder mineral provide the Availa-4 mineral
- Have a breeding soundness exam and semen test done on your bulls to help ensure high pregnancy rates
- Watch for signs of anaplasmosis in your herd—older cows are typically more affected

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