

Culling The Cow Herd in Drought Situations

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Deciding which cows to cull is a job no one likes to do, but it must be done. Beef profits are tied directly to the number and pounds of calves sold. Culling management is very important in ensuring that each cow on your farm has a high chance of producing a good calf with a high market value. The goal of a beef operation is for each cow to have a calf every year. Cows not meeting that goal are not making you money but are still costing you money to feed and manage.

As total input costs increase, beef producers must make good decisions on culling to improve their efficiency. During times of drought and high feed costs, culling becomes an even higher priority because it can help you target your resources into higher value animals and prevent you from wasting resources on feeding unproductive animals.

To have a good culling program, it is important to have records on your cattle. Some common information would be cow identification number, cow age, calving dates, calf information including weaning weights, and other observations you make about a cow (i.e., “wild in the working chute” or “mean when you approach her calf”). Your records can be as simple as a written record on a cow notecard created for that purpose or a simple computer spreadsheet can be developed. Either way, you will want to keep the information from year to year to help you prioritize which cows to cull. More advanced computer software is also available for maintaining cow herd records. Consult with your Cooperative Extension livestock agent for help in developing or improving your cow identification and record keeping program.

One very important thing to consider is how many cows you want to maintain on your farm. Determining the ideal number of brood cows for your farm will help you decide how many cows you need to cull each year to maintain that idea number. During times of drought you may need to cull down to fewer than that average ideal number. An early step in your drought management culling plan will be to decide which cows and replacement heifers you will keep no matter what happens.

The first step in the culling process is working the cows and making a prioritized list of cows so that culling can be an organized process. When working cattle, make sure you look closely at the cow’s eyes, feet, teeth and udder and record any defects you find. Haltering the cow will help you inspect her teeth with a low risk of injury to you. If you

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have never “mouthed” your cows, it is a key management tool at which every cow/calf producer should be skilled. As you work the cows, write down notes for use later as you assign the cow a culling priority score.

Following are criteria that should be considered as you make a culling priority list:

1. Pregnancy status – Pregnancy check all cows. The three main ways to pregnancy check are rectal palpation, ultrasound or blood tests. Cows that don't raise calves are not going to make you money and should be on the top of the cull list. These cows should be culled immediately. This would include any replacement heifers that are not pregnant, but that have been exposed to a bull and had the opportunity to breed. These animals would have a culling priority score of 1.
2. Major defects – Major defects would include very bad temperament, chronic lameness, eye problems (early signs of cancer eye), or severe udder problems. These cows should also be at the very top of the culling priority list with a score of 1.
3. Age - Inspect the teeth of cows so that you know the number of effective years each cow has left. Cows with broken teeth or badly worn teeth should be high on the culling list with a score of 1. If their teeth are somewhat worn indicating they are getting old, but they have a few years left in the herd they should get a score of 2. Cows with early signs of tooth wear (middle age cows) should receive a score of 3. These cows would usually be kept in a normal year, but may need to be culled in a severe drought or other situation that disrupts the feed supply.
4. Poor production – Consider culling cows that produce calves with very low weaning weights. These cows may calve every year, but their calves are small enough to where they are probably not making you much money. Calves with extremely light weaning weights should be given a culling score of 2. Calves with less than average weaning weights (but not extremely low) should be given a score of 3. Cows with poor performance over several years are not likely to improve, so cows that repeatedly wean calves less than the herd average should be considered for culling when the need arises to cull extra cows.
5. Late calvers – For farms with a calving season, consider selling any cows that will calve late or out of your window. These cows have a higher likelihood of coming up open or producing a light weight calf. These cows might end up with a high priority for culling due to low weaning weight, but even if they do produce a pretty good calf, they still should be considered for culling when you are culling deep. Pregnant cows in this category would be marketed differently than open, defective, or old cows. These cows may be out of line with your calving season, but they might work for someone else.
6. Poor doers – These are the cows that are always thin no matter what you do. They might get a high culling priority due to weaning a poor calf, or they might be old cows with short teeth. Even if they don't end up with a high culling priority due to one of the criteria discussed above, they should be considered for culling

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during a drought year because there is a higher chance that they might not breed back, or that they might have underlying health issues that would come out during times of stress.

7. Extremes – A deep culling due to drought might be a good time to consider selling any cows that are extremes in terms of frame size or muscling in your herd. This may be very small or very large cows that produce calves that are not uniform with the rest of your calf crop, or perhaps dairy-cross, or off color cows. Anything you can do to increase the uniformity of your herd will help you with future marketing plans.

During drought situations, producers must make difficult decisions about culling and will usually cull some cows that they would normally keep. Depending on the severity of the drought and your feed situation, you can use your culling priority list to sell cows in an orderly fashion. One decision you need to make is how many cows you will keep no matter what to rebuild in the future. Typically, this group includes the replacement heifers and the productive young to middle-aged cows free of any defects listed above.

Maybe instead of being depressed about selling off productive cows to deal with a drought, you should think of a deep culling as an opportunity to improve your herd and to use a good marketing plan to generate funds to help feed the core of your genetic resource. Nearly every producer will do some culling as part of their drought management plan. As you make the difficult culling decisions, it is important that you get the best price for your cows. Carrying a lot of cows to the sale barn is probably not the best approach, especially for young and middle-aged cows that are bred or that have a calf at side.

Using your cow records and observations at cow working you can best decide where to sell each cow. Talk to a marketing specialist and make an effective marketing plan. There are strong markets inside and outside the state for both slaughter cows and young to middle-age bred replacement cows, so make sure you consider all your marketing options. When you cull in response to drought, regardless of how you decide to market the cows, make sure you do it before they lose body condition and a lot of their potential value.

Culling strategies based on sound facts and decision making will only benefit your farm in the long run. Gathering information on the cows and then deciding which to sell and which to keep is a key tool in drought management. Keeping young and productive cows and selling old or defective cows will allow you to grow back into a greatly improved herd once the drought is over.

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