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Conscientious Culling

Amongst the back-to-school first day photos that have been popping up on my social media, there have been photos of processing calves prior to or at weaning from folks across the United States. Typically, this time of year the discussion around weaning stems from a lack of forage and ways to manage cows and calves on limited resources. The abundance of summer rainfall puts us in a different position now, but markets have had record prices, making one wonder if this isn't a good marketing window to capture value in? My focus today will be on the cow side of this discussion, particularly the cows need to be considered for culling at weaning.

It is no secret that the nation's cowherd is at historically low levels. Many of the top economists in the business don't see this trend turning around soon for several reasons, such as higher slaughter weights, heifer retention numbers and geographic weather conditions ranging from drought to flooding. All of this might make you wonder what to do with the current cows within your herd. Weaning time is a good time to assess and make management decisions.

The high value of slaughter and bred cows right now might make you think differently about a cull cow marketing strategy, but some basic considerations should still guide decisions. One of old adages around cull cows is utilizing the rule of "O's". This has been expressed with slight differences in discussion groups but basically revolves around culling out females that fall within one or more of the following categories: Open, Old, Ornery, Oddball/Out/Off.

One of the single most important links to profitability in a cow/calf operation is having bred cows that raise and wean a live calf each year. Those cows who are found to not be pregnant are the first category to cull against. Marketing strategies include selling the cows at weaning time, feeding them to increase body condition and potentially breeding them to sell as later bred females. There are pros and cons to each decision that vary by operation.

Cows will reach prime production between 4 and 5 years of age. Additionally, research has shown that a cow needs to produce 4 or 5 calves to get to a place of profitability, which makes getting cows to and through "middle age" a goal. Although cows can live and produce calves for 15 or more years, by age 10 most start to wean smaller calves, are more likely to come up open and have health issues. Therefore, older cows become a second culling criteria.

Bullfighters may enjoy dealing with ornery cattle, but those cows with bad disposition, who are aggressive and hard to work with, need to be considered for culling. No matter how good her calves are, keeping an aggressive cow around is not worth the risk of injury. This is especially true for operations with older producers or young children. Disposition is a moderately heritable trait, so keeping daughters of ornery cows often propagates this issue.

The final culling criteria is for anything that doesn't fit the remainder of the herd or is a potential problem. This can be bad feet, bad legs, bad udder, bad eyes, missing teeth, poor health history, late breeder, hair coat diluter, doesn't shed hair, can't handle summer heat or really anything that is non-conforming to the rest of the cowherd? Culling out these issues makes the cowherd better in the long-term.

Utilization of cow production records can help make culling decisions. Checking pregnancy status, weighing calves and cows each year at weaning has several long-term benefits. The top cows wean off the highest percentage of their mature weight each year. These more productive cows are those that combine genetic potential to conceive/calve early in the season, avoid health issues and have appropriate mature weight and milk potential relative to their production environment.