KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Extension
Meadowlark District

November 6, 2026

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Culling Now or Later

Boy howdy, it sure got muddy quickly! What comes as a blessing can also present challenges to other aspects of management. Summer heat delayed weaning and now mud is deterring bringing cows back through the chute for fall management in many operations. One of the decisions spring calving cow herd managers face, is when to cull cows. Cull cows represent an important part of operational income, so getting the most out of cows leaving the herd is important.

Cow-calf producers with spring calving herds typically wean calves in late summer or early fall then make decisions about culling cows from the herd. Culling decisions are based on many factors related to fertility, productivity, management ease, and health. In tandem with the culling decision is marketing, either marketing cull cows immediately or retaining them for marketing later.

Many factors influence this decision, including individual cow health, cash flow needs, resources for retention and feeding, current market conditions versus market expectations, and time. If a cull cow is not healthy enough or structurally sound enough to stay in the herd, immediately going on the trailer for marketing is often the best bet to capture the most value. If a cull cow carries good body condition, she should also join those on the trailer, as adding or maintaining weight will likely be more costly than any revenue gained from the seasonal price upswing.

Conversely, if a cull cow is sound, reasonably healthy and not over-conditioned, AND resources are available, there are multiple retention strategies with the potential for increasing cull cow salvage values in a profitable way. These strategies focus on taking advantage of the typical spring upswing in cull cow prices without spending all the revenue gain on feed intake cost. Additionally, an option may exist to breed the cow and sell her as a bred cow.

The basic math works like this. The decision to feed cows through winter and market in spring or early summer, must be profitable. The net returns for doing this have to be higher than what the value of marketing today is, minus the cost of retaining and feeding those cows. Research done at Oklahoma State in a multi-year study indicated that cows in lower body condition scores (less than 6) had the potential to gain value by feeding through winter.

This was especially true in systems with lower input cost like; dormant native grass pastures, utilizing crop residues, wheat pasture or feeding excess hay supplies. Cows in better body condition at weaning were proven to not necessarily be more profitable by adding weight. In some cases, cows losing or maintaining weight were still profitable, simply by added cull cow value later.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Fact Sheet AGEC-629 Beef Cull Cow Management and Marketing Alternatives is a good resource for those wanting to dig into this topic. Be careful not to spend all the value gained from feeding cows on feed cost. Push the pencil to see what works for your operation.