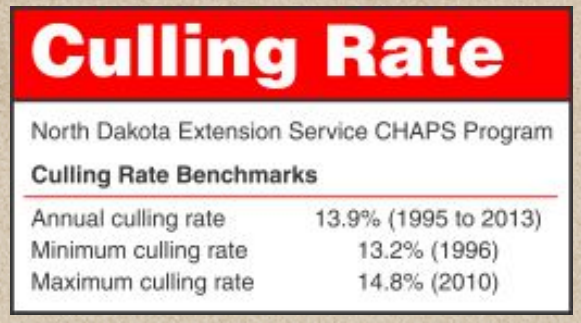
BeefTalk 734: When a Cow is Determined to be Market Beef, Sell Her

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



Is the current market demand for beef strong enough to let more cows go or should a producer hold on to more cows to increase the herd?

Got cows to sell? If you do, sell them. You only have to look at the prices to know the market is looking for beef. Producers always have some cows to sell if they want to.

Current discussions focus on increasing cow numbers, but it may be ill-advised to change cow culling schemes. When a cow is determined to be market beef, sell her. Maintaining old cows that are subject to more structural problems, already are having difficulty keeping up with the herd and more than likely are going to wean a lighter calf are headaches cattle producers do not need.

In addition, relaxing expectations that a cow should conceive and raise a live calf every year eventually will lead to reproductive inefficiencies in the cow herd.

Fortunately, cattle producers have been diligent in maintaining rigid culling principles. In fact, it is remarkable just how consistent those culling numbers have been. If one looks at the long-term historical benchmark values since 1995 for the annual culling rate percentage of cows exposed to the bull, the culling rate was 13.9 percent.

The percentage comes from North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association beef producers involved in the North Dakota State University Extension Service CHAPS program.

The more recent 2013 benchmark value for culling rate was 13.5 percent. These numbers are rolling five-year averages that are intended to reflect what is happening historically with CHAPS herds. By presenting the continually rolling five-year average, the highs and lows are buffered and a more understandable trend is generated.

In reviewing the older data back to 1995, the lowest culling percentage benchmark was 13.2 percent in 1996 and the highest was 14.8 percent in 2010. These numbers reflect how managers cull cows. The numbers seem to be quite stable.

Is the current market demand for beef strong enough to let more cows go or should a producer hold on to more cows to increase the herd? If past history means much in answering the question, one only is talking the difference of two cows

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per 100 head between the low and high culling rates.

The culling rate has been very constant when one views previous years because producers seem to have culled 13 to 15 percent of the herd annually for quite some time.

Looking at the annual culling details, approximately 6 percent go as open cows and 3 percent will lose a calf. The remaining culled cows are old, ornery or structurally unsound. Are any of these cows really worth keeping for another year? Probably not.

A long-term culling strategy is relatively unforgiving. Cows need to be part of a herd, so when they are not, the costs go up significantly. In addition, cows do not have independent living facilities available to recline in during their later years. Productivity is a lifelong expectation.

What if the culling rate could be changed and the long-term average was dropped to an arbitrary 10 percent? That would mean four cows that normally would be culled would not be. Because changing the culling rate does not change the stocking rate, the four extra cows do not change total herd productivity based on available grazing units.

All that really happened was four potentially headache-type cows were retained. These cows would have an above-average risk of losing their calves or having additional structural problems. In addition, lower milk production resulting in a lighter calf weight weaned would be the norm. Also, when the producer finally markets the cow, her market value would more than likely be lower.

That being said, the goal still should be to maintain current culling standards, but decreasing the culling rate by increasing the number of years a cow will stay in production. Can that be done?

Some cows are being selected because of breed longevity. When one looks around, there is a noticeable variation in the longevity of living things. However, the real question is: Can a producer increase the number of years a cow will be productive but not the number of years a cow will live? Those are two different traits.

Regardless, keep a rigid cull criteria and then turn your attention to the replacement heifer selection. Keep the good ones.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at http://www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to http://www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet.