

Have a Plan to Get Rid of Freeloading Cows

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If the current shortage of moisture and feed continues, cattle producers must face up to the fact that not all the cows in the herd can be maintained at an adequate state of nutrition to produce at a level that would justify buying feed. In general, producers react to drought by focusing on feed resources, using previous years needs as their bench mark. When purchasing feed, the check book should force us to ask, "Are all these cows really worth feeding?"

In this situation, cattle producers must keep in their herds those cows that are expected to return a profit and not increase the debt load. In other words, it's time to get rid of the freeloaders.

Faced with the prospect that cattle numbers must be reduced, first do the obvious and eliminate all open cows, cows that lost calves, and structurally unsound or emaciated cows from the herd. After the obvious choices are gone, it's time to check the calving records to make the second cut.

Find the point in the calving book where the mature cows started to calve. Provide a reference point: find the second mature cow that calved. Draw a circle on that day and count down 45 days from the date she calved and draw a second line. Sell all the cows below the second line. This will eliminate late calving cows with a high probability of not breeding back because of nutritional stress. This also eliminates cows that will be cycling when bulls may have lower fertility because of late summer heat stress.

Heat-stressed bulls have reduced fertility for up to six weeks following exposure to intense heat. Cows cycling late in the breeding season will also have reduced chances of conceiving a calf for next year. The third cut should be based on age. Sort off cows that are 10 years old or older.

At this point, evaluate the feed situation. If the situation is still uncomfortable, sort the remaining cows on the basis of performance records and sell the bottom

20 percent. These should be cows that weaned lighter calves based on 205-day adjusted weaning weights or that have low MPPA (producing ability) values as calculated by the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association CHAPS program, or some other reputable program.

After this cut, the only cows remaining in the herd are those that calve early and produce good calves. Given the likely cost of buying cows back next year, try to save this core group of cows by buying additional feed. If this is not feasible, sell two-, three- and four-year-old cows that did not calve in the first 21 days of the calving season. At this point, if feed remains short, plan on early weaning the calf crop and place them on feed to reduce cow herd feed intake to the minimum. After weaning, the cows can tolerate marginal feed since they are not lactating.

Replacement heifers should not be sold until the decision is made that the core cow group can't be maintained after early weaning the calves. Replacement heifers are the first females bred, are not raising calves, are genetically superior to the current cows and hold their market value longer.

Obviously there comes a point when orderly marketing is difficult, and the steps can vary with individual situations. The cow is a valuable item. Remember to have a plan, keep a level head and inventory resources frequently so you can implement the plan if resources continue to fade.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0099.

A Priority List for Reducing Demand on Feed Resources

First Cut — open, unsound or emaciated cows and cows without calves

Second Cut — late-calving cows (45 days from start of mature cows calving)

Third Cut — cows 10 years old or older

Fourth Cut — poor performing cows

Fifth Cut — young cows not calving within 21 days from start of calving mature cows

Sixth Cut — early-wean all remaining calves

Seventh Cut — mature cows

Eighth Cut — replacement heifers

