



BeefTalk 740: Cull Deep Enough to Find Those Freeloaders

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



Today, with an aggressive bidding for weigh-up cows and market bulls, why take the risk of pushing a cow an extra year? As condition and body weight decline, so does value, but managerial inputs and labor increase.

The bottom line: Cows need to survive, produce and repeat the cycle yearly, with no additional pampering. No exceptions.

As we move into the fall season, cattle work begins. Part of that work is culling cows, which is not fun. The cows have dedicated their lives to the operation, but there is no reward. The cows must produce or move to the pen destined for market.

Even though cow numbers are down, keeping cows that are not likely to produce a worthy calf next year is fruitless. Culling really is a process of drawing a line in the sand, and those cows that cannot cross the line are sent to market. At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the line is a combination of managerial chute-side judgments and data.

On the judgment side, cows without teeth and/or low body condition are culled. One asks: Is that one tooth, two teeth, three teeth or no teeth? Is a body condition score of 1 or 2

too low or maybe even a 3? Oh, don't forget to check the udder, as well as limbs, joints, bumps, lump jaw, eye health and any other notable problem, including temperament.

In reality, the chute operator has just a few seconds to determine which pen the cow goes to. The secret of good culling is in knowing and understanding cattle and assessing the potential of integrating that cow back into the operation. It only takes seconds, but the fate of the cow hangs in the balance.

“Out the door,” says the chute boss only to see the next cow cut off to the holding pen. Cows are seldom, if ever, cut back out of the main group. However, cows in the holding pen get another once-over as well as verification of the tag



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number.

Because the decision is final and mistakes are not appreciated, a second look is appropriate. More than anything, visually reviewing those cows that no longer will be in the herd certainly begs the question of why they won't be. A little more feed here, a timely rain there or maybe just age: This is the time for the manager to ask questions.

We often talk about developing numeric systems to evaluate and score cows for all the numerous problems. The challenge with that is that cows generally are seen and worked only once in the fall. The next opportunity to reassess the cow may be when the cow receives her precalving shots. However, from a ranch perspective, once that cow returns to the main herd at weaning, there is little incentive to cull her.

Each day, she is one day closer to calving, and unless she does not have a calf to turn out for grazing, she is good to go until next year. The only time judgment culls are skipped is when the cow is pregnancy checked as open. In that case, the cull is automatic. Sometimes, when those good cows come down the chute and the call is open, the heart sinks just a little.

Again, it may not have been the cow's fault, but the bottom line is that open cows are market beef.

So where does the data fit in? Data is critical, but during the work day, its use is not always obvious. Granted, the chute-side evaluator needs to make a keep-or-market decision, but reviewing the previous year's data is critical to guiding the operation.

Did those changes get made the previous year? Did one see a change in cow longevity? Will a change be seen in this year's data? Actually, given all the activity, the majority of culls are determined chute-side, so a lot, if not most, of the culling is done before the data sheets are reviewed.

A pondering point: I occasionally hear the comment that a producer does not keep any performance data. Performance data is key to moving a herd forward. However, in reality, for many reasons, performance data tends to be a long way down the priority list.

Although the actual work is done at the same time, the total number of culls is not known until the end of the day. How many cows can a producer afford to sell? Many times, by the time all the chute-side calls are made, the list already has met the needed criteria for the herd.

That being said, cows that do not produce are just one notch above those cows that are open. Some pressure needs to be maintained to allow the good looking, nonperforming cows (free loaders) a chance at the market gate.

As a thought for the day: Why not spend a little time finding the "freeloaders" and use the funds they chew up to give the help a raise?

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.

