

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Know the Cull Cow Grades Before You Sell

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Some culling of beef cows occurs in most herds every year. The Beef Audits have generally shown that cull cows, bulls, and cull dairy cows make up about 20% of the beef available for consumption in the United States. About half of this group (or 10% of the beef supply) comes from cull beef cows. Fall-calving herds have the luxury of weaning and culling the cows when the market is usually favorable.

In a drought-plagued year, the percentage of some herds that are being culled goes even higher than the survey estimates of 20% of each cow herd. Whether we are culling because of drought or to improve the productivity of the herd, it is important to understand the values placed on cull cows intended for slaughter.

The USDA market news service reports on four classes of cull cows. The four classes are divided primarily on fatness. The highest conditioned cull cows are reported as "Breakers". They usually are quite fleshy and generally have excellent dressing percentages. Body condition score 7 and above are required to be "Breakers".



The next class is a more moderate conditioned group of cows called "Boners" or "Boning Utility". These cows usually would fall in the body condition score grades of 5 to 7. Many well-nourished commercial beef cows would be graded "Boners".



The last two groups of cows as reported by the market news service are the "Leans" and "Lights". These cows are very thin (Body condition scores 1 - 4).



They are in general expected to be lower in dressing percentage than the fleshier cows and are more easily bruised while being transported than are cows in better body condition. "Lights" are thin cows that are very small (generally 900 pounds or less) and would have very low hot carcass weights.

Leans and Lights are nearly always lower in price per pound than are the Boners and the Breakers. "Lights" often bring the lowest price per pound because the amount of saleable product is small, even though the overhead costs of slaughtering and processing are about the same as larger, fleshier cows.

Producers that sell cull cows should pay close attention to the market news reports about the price differentials of the cows in these classes. Cull cows that can be fed enough to gain body condition to improve from the Lean class to Boner class can gain weight and gain in value per pound at the same time. Seldom, if ever, does this situation exist elsewhere in the beef business. Unfortunately, it is inevitable that another drought will occur somewhere in Oklahoma in years to come. During a drought, market your cull cows while still in good enough condition to fall in the Boner grade. If cows are being culled while very thin, consider short term dry lot feeding to take them up in weight and up in grade. This usually can be done in about 50 to 70 days with excellent feed efficiency. Rarely does it pay to feed enough to move the cow to "Breaker" class. There is very little, if any price advantage of Breakers over Boners and cows lose feed efficiency if fed to that degree of fatness.

Length of Breeding Season Does Matter

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A research analysis of 394 ranch observations from the Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico SPA (standardized performance analysis) data set provided insight into the age old argument about "leaving the bull out" or having a defined breeding season. Oklahoma State University and Texas A&M Agricultural Economists published the findings of this research in 2005. (Parker, et al. 2005. Journal of Agriculture and Applied Economics. Vol. 37; August issue). They found a positive relationship between number of days of the breeding season and the production cost per hundredweight of calf weaned. Also they reported a negative relationship between number of days of the breeding season and pounds of calf weaned per cow per year. The data suggested that for each day the breeding season was lengthened, the annual cost of producing a hundred pounds of weaned calf increased by 4.7 cents and pounds of calf weaned per cow per year decreased by 0.158 pounds.

The range of breeding seasons in the data set was from extremely short (less than one month) to 365 days or continuous presence of the bull. The trend lines that resulted from the analysis of the data give us an opportunity to evaluate the economic importance of a defined breeding season. The producer that leaves the bull out year-round (365 days) would sell 45.82 fewer pounds of calf per cow per year on the average than producers with a 75 day breeding season. That same producer would have \$13.63 greater costs per hundredweight of weaned calf than the producer that used a 75 day breeding season. Length of the breeding season does matter.

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