

To cull or not to cull — that's the question

DAVIS, Ca. — Culling the right cows can affect more than just a milking operation's profitability. It may also determine a milk producer's future, according to dairy researchers across the country.

With reduced milk price supports, both milk diversion participants and those who didn't sign up will be pressured to become more efficient producers, notes Donald Bath, extension dairy specialist with the University of California at Davis.

The milk diversion program does offer participating dairymen an excellent opportunity to cull problem cows and make their herds more efficient, Bath points out. However, he suggests, even those not participating could be better off culling their herds instead of cutting back on feeding rates in an effort to reduce operating costs. This allows dairymen to focus their attention and feeding programs on cows with the proven ability to generate income, he says.

"When milk prices were high, some producers could afford to have an inefficient or unprofitable cow or two," Bath observes. "But not anymore. Now, they must have what some extension economists call 'cash register cows' — cows that generate income."

Difficulty Setting Criteria

Sorting cash register cows from those that milk away a dairy's profits is difficult, adds Charles Sniffen, extension dairy nutritionist at Cornell University.

Too often, dairymen cull cows for the wrong reasons, he claims, because they don't consider all the criteria a culling decision entails.

Dairymen should not cull cows without taking the entire picture into consideration, says Sniffen. "If a cow isn't a top producer, she may still have many desirable traits," he explains. "For example, a sound, healthy cow that will be able to produce milk for a long time might be a better animal to keep than a higher producing cow with a history of breeding problems."

Producers should cull a cow only after determining that she isn't producing income to justify her continued presence in the herd, suggests Dr. Nate Smith, director of dairy research for Ralston Purina Company. If at all possible, he adds, they should not cull any cows until they've graded each according to a set of guidelines.

For example, Dr. Smith says, a key culling consideration is milk production so cows with low genetic potential should always be considered in any culling targets. Prime culling candidates, he suggests, include first calf heifers producing less than two-thirds the herd average, as well as older cows below herd average.

Advise Caution

But, before making any culling decision based upon production data, dairymen should make certain they're getting top potential from each cow, Smith cautions. He explains that many producers seeking cost reductions have unbalanced their milking

rations, effectively reducing cost-efficiency.

"Response to an unbalanced ration may vary among cows and first-calf heifers," he explains. "Before culling a cow that could become your top producer, we strongly recommend making sure an improperly balanced feeding program is not the real production problem."

Once a feeding program can be removed as a consideration, Smith adds, dairymen can begin deciding which cows should be culled.

For example, says Smith, cows that have had repeated breeding problems are ready for culling. "Even if a cow is a top milk producer, the money made on extra milk in early lactation can be lost quickly if she remains open for an extended period of time," he says. "A delayed calving interval means lost milk production, lower average production over the cow's milking lifetime and reduced profits," he points out.

Comparing Costs

In addition, cows with chronic health problems such as mastitis, as well as cows with foot, leg or other injury associated problems, should be given first consideration

for culling. However, Smith warns, these cows should not be culled automatically. First, he suggests, dairymen should compare the costs of treatment and extra labor against a cow's future milking profitability. If a cow could recover, and if her milking potential justifies the expense, he says, then she should be kept unless other criteria weigh against her.

Agreeing, Bath adds, dairymen culling sick cows must consider both the long and short term affects of an illness upon a cow's milking capabilities. "Some temporary ailments significantly impair a cow's milk production level through the current lactation," Bath notes. "Although these cows may recover, dairy farmers might be better off to cull such cows. On the other hand, it may be worthwhile to keep a sick cow if her genetic ability shows she could be profitable in the future. Whenever possible, milk producers should cull cows based on more than just one criteria," he emphasizes.

In addition to health problems, cows that consistently cause management problems are also

candidates for culling, Smith observes, particularly those difficult to milk or those who disrupt the milking routine of other cows.

Nonetheless, the value of milk produced by a cow over feed and management costs is the single most important criteria that should be considered in timing the culling decision, he adds. Generally, older cows are more likely to be culling candidates, especially if they fall within other culling criteria, Smith says.

Once dairymen have decided which cows to cull, and when to sell, Smith points out, they can then focus attention on their top producing cows. This will result in a more efficient use of existing facilities and resources, while also improving profit potential, he concludes.



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