

Capitol Region Dairy Team

DAIRY ANIMALS ARE ALSO BEEF ANIMALS Galen Kopp **Extension Agent** Dairy/Livestock Lebanon County

Dairy culling decisions are often defined by compelling forces that have historically been milk price, stall availability, and the cost and availability of replacement animals. Thus, profitable culling is often not recognized or practiced because it is viewed as a negative cost instead of a positive opportunity. And the animal removed is viewed as salvage with little value.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Much of the beef from cull cows is processed into ground beef. When mixed with fed beef trimmings, this product represents 43 percent of all beef consumed in this country.

But, there's more. Today, about half of the beef from dairy cull cows is processed and merchandised as whole-muscle cuts for food favorites such as fajitas, cheesesteaks, deli and fast-food roast beef, and marinated steaks.

It's A Human Health Issue

The way dairies approach their culling and treatment decisions has become a human health issue in perception and reality. Because of the public focus on food safety and animal health issues, packers are beginning to require producers to certify that they have followed FDA regulations concerning drug use and meat withdrawal as well as certifying that the animals were fed in accordance with the FDA ban on feeding ruminant-derived protein



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(meat and bone meal) to cattle or other ruminants.

Good managers recognize that the same management and culling practices that assure beef quality also contribute to dairy profitability. When voluntary culling decisions are put off, the result is more "forced" removals on the market. By then, substantial value to the beef industry and profit opportunities for the producer are lost. Plus, the animal poses a risk to consumer confidence.

limited replacements and the flexibility of modern dairy systems add to the prevalence of "forced" culls on the market. As physical constraints such as facili-

ty space become less compelling factors, the broader economic and image factors of keeping the marginal dairy cow become more compelling.

The low-milk or diseasecompromised cow loses carcass value daily as she either becomes too fat, too thin, or more lame. The decision to keep or cull an animal should include assessing her environmental cost to the landlimited operation and the public image her deteriorated market condition conveys about the dairy and beef industries.

Recognize Profitable Culling

Culling and replacement are critical management areas, accounting for 20 to 25 percent of the operating costs of a dairy second only to feed costs. Returns from the sale of cull cows represent 4 percent of total returns for the average dairy operation, according to statistics from the 1999 National Market Cow and **Bull Quality Audit.**

A comprehensive, timely approach to culling, which results in more voluntary decisions and fewer "forced" removals, has been shown to increase net returns per cow for the entire dairy herd.

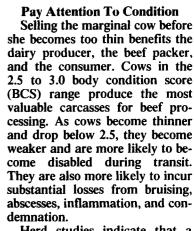
"Culling is a complex decision, and we often do not recognize profitable culling," said Dr. David Gallagan, associate professor, animal health economics, University of Pennsylvania New Bolton Center. "The gray zone cow in a milking herd can be as costly as any subclinical disease. Every day, a cow faces that decision, and every day the producer intentionally or nonintentionally makes that decision. We want to step back and look at this as a new disease --- the failure to make the right decision to maintain the right combination of cows in production."

Dairy animals eventually do become beef animals. Quality defects such as bruising, abscesses, inflammation, and condemnation have a pervasive negative effect on the price that beef processors can pay for cows. According to the 1999 Quality Audit, approximately 2 percent of all slaughter cows are condemned by USDA. But, among the very thin and disabled cows, condemnation loss is 40 percent.

Make Decisions Early

These losses can be prevented by culling animals with health conditions earlier. Animals that become disabled, have terminal conditions, or have not passed their treatment meat residue withdrawal period must be euthanized, not marketed.

It's difficult to remove the emotional aspects that underlay these decisions. Marketing cows before that certain loss of body weight is important, but it means you're making the decision before you've given up hope on her.



Herd studies indicate that a high percentage of culls are marketed in early lactation, many of them disease-compromised "forced" removals. According to the 1999 Quality Audit, 72.5 percent of dairy cull cows had inadequate muscling and 5.4 percent of all dairy cull cows were in a serious negative energy balance with insufficient body condition scores of 1.

These extremes can be prevented. Through better management and timely culling, dairy producers can reap an additional 5 percent in cull cow income -- without adding costs to the operation.

Double Benefits, Not Losses

Just as sound nutritional management improves the overall health and performance of the milking animal, it also improves her value as a beef animal. The tough but critical part is making the voluntary decision before body condition deteriorates.

In beef value alone, timely culling increases producer revenue in two ways - by weight (pounds) and by value (per pound). Better body condition puts the animal into a more valuable beef processing class. The double benefit is a difference of \$144 between the timely decision and the "forced" removal 30 days later.

Think of it this way. That \$144 difference based on condition alone is equivalent to 1,100 pounds of \$13 milk. Now include the cost to keep her milking, and she would have to make 60 pounds a day for the next 30 days to offset declining beef value.

When low milk cows are kept past break-even, or disease-compromised cows are kept until they are overtly biologically broken, they incur double losses for the

dairy. They are not putting income back into the operation, and they are taking up space that a more productive animal could be using. Even the apparently healthy low milk cow can quickly lose value as she gains weight instead of making milk with the energy she consumes.

The per-pound beef value diminishes rapidly as cows approach BCS 4 and 5. "With our cows, we've mainly learned not to hold heavier animals quite as long," said Jeff Grove. Jeff and his brother Jay milk 175 cows near Shippensburg. They pay attention to why cull cows bring the prices they do. Producers benefit when they view culling decisions as a positive, productive, and profitable function of dairy management --- and view themselves as contributors of valued beef products instead of salvage price-takers. Source: The Pennsylvania Beef Council and National Cattlemen's Beef Association.



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