

Removing Beef Cows from the Herd Before They Become a Problem

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Cows generate 70-75% of “non-fed” beef in the US and are used for more than just ground beef (roasts, steaks, fajita strips, etc.). Because these animals are worth more than ever before, it is important to market them while they are healthy and mobile. “Downer cows” are no longer accepted by market facilities and buyers are weary of cattle that are more likely to be condemned at the packing facility.

Beef consumers and the general public are more interested now about where their food comes from and how it is produced than at any other point in the history of modern beef production. Marketing cows before their health declines not only makes the herd more profitable, it also helps the entire industry maintain the good reputation for animal care that it deserves.

Think about the decision to market cows as if you are giving each cow in the herd an **annual performance review** for their job and consider the following checklist for marketing criteria:

- Pregnancy check all cows. Any mature cow or replacement female that is not pregnant should be sold to maintain the profitability of the operation. For bulls, have a breeding soundness exam done before each breeding season and market bulls that do not pass.
- Major defects would include very bad temperament, chronic lameness, eye problems (early signs of cancer eye), or severe udder problems.
- Inspect teeth of cows so that you know the number of effective years each cow has left. Cows with broken teeth or badly worn teeth should be high on the market list. Teeth that are somewhat worn indicate they are getting old, but they have a few years left in the herd
- Market cows that produce calves with very low weaning weights. Calves with extremely light weaning weights should be sold soon. Make a note of cows producing calves with less than average weaning weights (but not extremely low). Cows that repeatedly wean calves less than the herd average should be considered for marketing when the need/opportunity arises to sell extra cows.
- For farms with a calving season, consider selling any cows that will calve late or out of your window. These cows have a higher likelihood of coming up open in the next breeding season or producing a lightweight calf. Pregnant cows in this category would be marketed differently than open, defective, or old cows. These cows may be out of line with your calving season, but they might work for someone else.
- Market cows that do not maintain their body condition score when fed properly. Even if they do not end up with a high marketing priority due to one of the criteria discussed above, they should be considered for selling during a drought year because there is a higher chance that they will not breed back, or that they have underlying health issues that would come out during times of stress.
- A deep culling might be a good time to consider selling any cows that are extreme in frame size or muscling in your herd. This may be very small or very large cows that produce calves that are not uniform with the rest of your calf crop, perhaps dairy-cross or off color cows. Anything you can do to increase the uniformity of your herd will help you with future marketing plans.

These criteria might not fit each farm/ranch perfectly. But, starting with these general concepts and tailoring them to you specific objectives should help identify cows that need to be marketed. Selling market cows at the right time will improve profits for that year and build profitability for future calf crops.