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Farm Update

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Clint Hardy
Daviess County Extension Office

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Deciding Who to Cull and When

Last week's article discussed two important measures of profit in beef cattle: weaning rate and weaning weight. Dr. Michelle Arnold, UK Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, shared the following key traits to help determine when it is time to cull a cow.

Cows not pregnant, structural soundness, body condition score, age, annual performance, and disposition are all factors to consider when developing a “culling order” for your farm. The culling order is essentially a ranking of the most important reasons a cow would not be a productive member of the herd on your farming operation.

Disposition. A good cow can be protective of her calf without being dangerous and destructive. Bulls that show aggression towards humans should be culled immediately.

Pregnancy Status. A cow should produce a calf once a year, and the sale of that calf needs to pay the dam’s “living expenses”. Diagnosing a cow as open is as simple as having a veterinarian palpate for pregnancy at least 40 days after breeding or after the bull is removed. There are also several simple, inexpensive blood tests available on the market that may be used post-breeding to determine pregnancy status. If multiple cows are found open at pregnancy check, work with a veterinarian to try to determine the cause.

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Structural Soundness. Good feet and legs are essential for maintaining body condition, breeding, calving, self-defense, and raising a calf. A conformational defect, such as corkscrew claw is regarded as a heritable trait and a strong reason to cull.

Udder Quality. Milk production in beef cows is one of the most important factors affecting calf preweaning growth and body weight at weaning. A structurally sound udder should be firmly attached and high enough that newborn calves can easily find and latch onto clean, average-sized teats. Udder quality in beef cattle is moderately heritable, so females with good, or bad, udders tend to pass that trait to their daughters. Culling these cows with poor teat and udder conformation and selecting replacements with better udder traits will make a noticeable difference in calf performance.

Chronic Disease. Cows showing signs of chronic disease conditions that will not improve should be culled and only sold for slaughter. Two examples of chronic disease conditions include diarrhea and progressive weight loss from Johne's Disease and "cancer eye".

Age. Cows are considered most productive between 4 and 9 years of age. Cows with badly worn or missing teeth may have a difficult time maintaining body condition. Older cows that stay in good condition and raise a calf every year do not have to be removed just because of advanced age.

Poor Performance. Record keeping is an invaluable tool for evaluating performance. Readable visual tags on both the cow and calf allow one to match calf sale weights to their respective dams and identify cows that did not produce a calf. Dams with inferior genetics and poor milk production produce lightweight calves that do not grow well. An overweight cow with a small calf that doesn't gain weight as it should generally means the cow is keeping calories to herself rather than producing milk. Calves that get sick prior to weaning may indicate dams that

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produced poor-quality colostrum or have poor mothering ability. Any health issues, treatments given, and veterinary visits or expenses should be recorded in a standardized format for every herd member. Record abortions, stillbirths, difficulties with labor and delivery, and all calf death losses. It is important that all calves born, whether dead or alive, are taken into consideration. Enter that information on the specific cow's lifetime history.

The last ones to go. If conditions are such that only the best females can remain in the herd, consider selling those with the fewest productive years left, such as bred cows over 9 years old. Also, bred heifers or thin cows that conceived late in the breeding season will likely have a difficult time rebreeding next year and may be good candidates to leave while pregnant. A herd of easy-keeping, efficient cows is possible through managed culling, careful selection of replacements, and retention of young cows.

Holiday Closing

The Daviess County Cooperative Extension Office will be closed Wednesday, December 24, through Friday, January 2. We will reopen at 8:00 a.m. Monday, January 5.

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