



EXTENSION

BEEF CATTLE RESEARCH UPDATE

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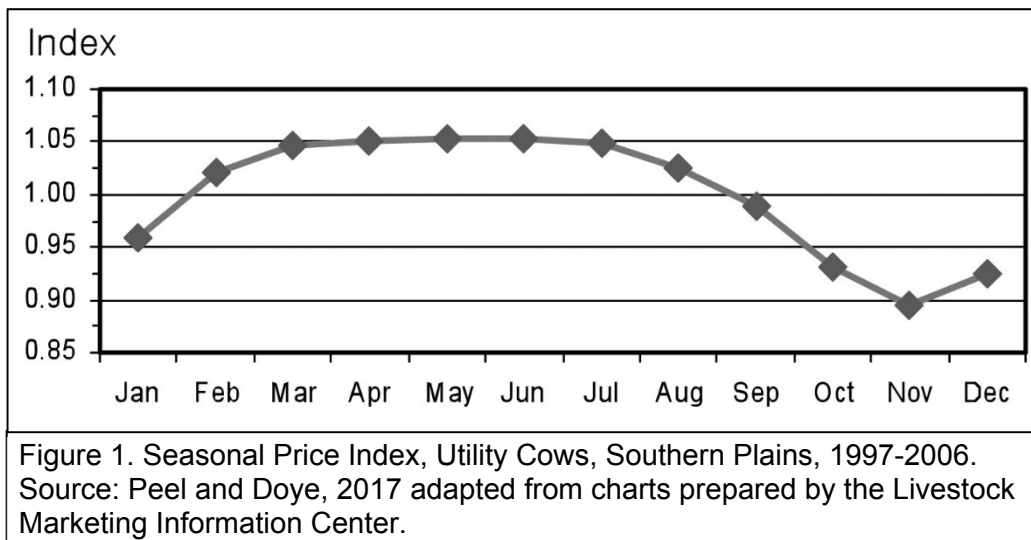
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Strategies for Managing Open Beef Cows

Cull cow marketing typically receives little of a cow-calf producer's attention despite the fact that cull animals represent 10 to 20% of total revenue for most cow-calf operations.¹ However, many producers simply choose to dispose of cull cows as quickly and easily as possible with little thought about the potential to optimize the salvage value of these animals. Since the majority of calves are weaned in the fall, most cow culling takes place immediately after weaning in the fall as well when prices are at a seasonal low. Figure 1 shows the seasonal tendency of cull cow prices in the southern plains for the years 1997-2006. However, it is possible to increase the value of cull cows by 25 to 45% or more by improving cull cow management and marketing.¹ Opportunities to add value come through adding weight, improving the quality classification, and taking advantage of seasonal price patterns.



The Noble Research Institute (Ardmore, OK) conducted a three-year (2015–2018) study using open beef cows (244 head) from a spring-calving herd in south-central Oklahoma with the objective to determine whether or not the net return of retaining, feeding, rebreeding, and marketing rebred cows was greater than the revenue from selling open cows at weaning.² In this study, each year at weaning, open cows were sorted into Thin or Moderate groups using an average Body Condition Score (BCS). Thin cows ($BCS < 5.5$) were fed a ration containing 11.4% crude protein and 63.9% TDN, while Moderate cows ($5.5 \leq BCS \leq 6.0$) were fed a ration containing 10.4% crude protein and 55.2% TDN. The rations were formulated to transform the final condition of all cattle to a BCS of 6. During the first 60 days of retention, two rested bulls were assigned to each feeding group. After 90 days of retention all cattle were pregnancy tested via ultrasound.

These researchers reported that on average, net return was affected by feeding treatment ($P = 0.0323$), age ($P < 0.0001$), and pregnancy status ($P < 0.0001$). They concluded that their “results suggest that producers who have the ability to sort and feed young, thin cows

in poorer condition and rebreed them using rested bulls can expect to earn \$68/head more than selling them as open at weaning”.

This research shows that cull cow marketing offers opportunities to increase profit per head in certain circumstances, certainly more so when feed is relatively cheap. Seasonal price patterns account for most of the potential for greater returns. Holding cows for longer periods of time increases costs as well as financial and production risk. Thus, cull cow grazing and feeding opportunities must be evaluated carefully. An OSU spreadsheet tool is available to assist producers in evaluating alternatives at <http://agecon.okstate.edu/faculty/publications/3078.xls>.

¹ Peel, D. S. and D. Doye. 2017. Cull Cow Grazing and Marketing Opportunities. Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Fact Sheet AGEC-613.

² Lira, S. M., J. T. Biermacher, E. Whitley, and D. Ford. 2019. Strategies for managing open beef cows. J. Anim. Sci. 97 (Suppl. S1):63 (Abstr.).