

Cut Winter Feed Costs By Culling Cow Herd

KIRKSVILLE, MO.

Beef herd owners can cut winter feed costs by not feeding unproductive cows. “Culling is step one,” said Justin Sexten, University of Missouri Extension beef nutritionist. “Sell cows that are not going to produce a calf.”

A nonpregnant cow will take 488 days to return her first paycheck, Sexten told beef producers at the Kirksville Livestock Symposium, Dec. 5. “Do the math before you decide to keep her. Think about how much feed she will eat before she pays back.”

At the symposium in 2008, when feed costs had doubled, the classroom was packed with those eager to learn how to cut costs. This year, with feed costs lower and hay plentiful, the large room was only partially filled.

“What a difference a year makes,” Sexten said in opening remarks.

“Feed costs still matter,” he said. “The major cost of keeping a cow all year is the winter feed. That is especially important in a time of lower cattle prices.”

While the winter feeding season is a good time to cull cows, it is not the best time to sell open cows.

The lowest cow price of the year is from November to January because more cull cows are going to market. “Cows palpated and found open are sold in November and December, while the ‘tax-time cows’ go to market in January,” Sexten said.

With plentiful forage available, Sexten suggested keeping cull cows through the winter and then turn them onto any unused flush growth of spring grass. That will put flesh on them to go to market in May and June when cow demand peaks.

If grass is abundant, as it was this year, cows

can be sold in July when they are in best condition, just as the cool-season grass growth begins to slump.

Another way to cut feed costs is to sort cattle by nutrient needs. “Sort cattle into three groups for greatest feed savings,” Sexten said.

If three groups are too much to handle, sort into two groups, he urged. “Sort cows that are fat enough to rebreed into one group, then put thin cows that might not conceive into a second group.”

Thin cows need most of the feed so they will breed and calve on time.

Another way to sort is to put the young, old and thin cows into a group for extra rations. The cows in good condition might not need any extra feed.

The best return on feed will be in preparing the young females for the breeding season, Sexten said. Also, second-calf heifers need extra feed as they are still growing, nursing a calf and getting ready to rebreed. Both young heifers and “sophomores” can be fed together.

Calving all cows within 30 days makes feeding easier, he said. “All will be at the same stage and have similar nutrient needs. If cows calve over a 90-day period, you have three herds of cattle with different feed needs.”

The calving season for the fall herd can be shortened by removing the bulls from the herd by Jan. 15. “Most people turn the bull into the fall herd around Thanksgiving. By taking the bull out in mid-January, they’ll have a 45-day breeding season,” Sexten said.

The MU Extension event, planned by a committee of farmers, is open to all without charge or advance reservations. The meeting also offers free meals, a trade show and entertainment. Δ



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