

# Sell Cows In Their Prime



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Any old cow is worth a lot these days, even at 60 cents times 1,000 pounds. That’s what you might get when cows become too old to maintain body condition or some other lurking negative trait catches up with them and they fail to breed back.

Statistics show an 8 percent to 10 percent cow culling rate at the markets. But how many don’t make it to the sale? Unfortunately, some death loss is a fact of life on a livestock farm, and the older the cows going through “one more winter,” the more likely some will fit into that statistic. Less than no value, considering the rendering fees or other management requirements.

An 8 percent culling rate and another 4 percent death loss on 100 cows that are older than average can mean 12 percent gone and you get paid \$4,800, or about \$400 net per head.

That may seem like worst case, but if you are trying to keep cows in the herd as long as they rebreed, you might recognize your case in that example.

I confess I was there when I started a commercial cowherd in the 1980s, keeping what bred back out of the sale-barn pairs I was buying to stock pastures. Of course, back then the net was more like \$200 for the cows that were no longer in the herd.

There had to be a better way.

I found it on a central Kansas stock farm known as THE source for bred cows, back when I was writing for Farm Journal in the late 1980s. The manager always sold his four-year-olds at auction – all of them – always setting the market top. That was up to \$1,800 even then.

He had nearly 300 commercial Angus females, divided into first-calf, second-calf and generally four-year-olds that would be sold after they rebred. He calved 200 or more each year, at least one-third heifers chosen by looks and deep

records.

The guy always bred about 100 heifers and sold a quarter based on those records for a few years. Then he just let people hand pick 20 because it was too hard for him to choose. They all tied for first. He was working on a tighter calving window and thought about selling a few outside of 30 days. He didn’t believe in cross-breeding, didn’t see a way to maintain the consistency. And we didn’t even talk about the consistency of steers in the feedlot; this was before the days of grid marketing.

I knew I would have to try that some day, and I’m still working on it.

Years later, I talked to Missourians who also sell bred cows in their prime to make room for better heifers, but they buy the progeny to feed along with their own. Half of their cattle grade Prime, but they are still fine tuning.

Of course, I have talked to other producers. Many cattlemen feed all their calves and track feedlot and carcass data, but the main feature is sorting into sire-group reports. Bulls can do so much in one generation, like 25 times more important than any cow, I have been told.

Their bull-centric herds improve over time as they track which bulls work on all sides from gain to grade to replacements. But one recurring problem is that some bulls turned out worse than expected, after the investment of keeping their daughters. One step forward, half a step back.

Bulls will always be important, just not the complete path to cowherd improvement. The sexes are equal: if you ignore selection on the cow side, you give up half of the steering wheel to Prime. You’re left with average cows bound for that low salvage value at best.

There are 25 times more cows than bulls, and they represent the foundation value of your herd. Cultivate that side to evolve a profit center with sales increasing from a few hundred bucks per head to several times that, as steers keep moving up in value in the feedlot and on the rail.

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