

How forgiving are you when it comes to deciding which cows should be kept or culled in your operation? Are you a no-mercy producer that strictly enforces the “one strike and you’re out” rule? Or, are you more lenient, handing out “second” chances time and time again? In order for your operation to be all it can be, cows that are almost guaranteed to lose money should not be kept in production. This week we will discuss some characteristics of these profit robbing females and offer suggestions of things to think about when deciding which cows to cull.

In many cases, the most unprofitable cows in a herd are those that are older, and have started losing their ability to be productive. Some physical areas of a cow that a producer may look at to gauge her productivity are her teeth/mouth, eyes, udder, and feet/legs. Cows that are most productive are usually those that have sound udders, and are very structurally sound, with healthy feet and legs that are free of arthritis or other issues. Although a physical assessment of each cow is a good measure to use when determining her productivity, a more accurate tool to use is to look at her calf. Often, the size and quality of the cow’s calf at weaning is a great way to measure the cow’s true productivity. To properly match each cow with her calf, it is important to implement a good ear tagging and record keeping system in your operation.

The second factor to take into account also relies on a good record keeping system, and describes two types of cows. The first is the cow that has either lost her calf, or did not have one at all. It is important to develop a good strategy for the management of open females in your herd. In December we discussed a few open female management suggestions in depth. Because each producer has different goals for his/her operation, we recommend that you refer to that article and decide which option best fits your operation. The second type of cow that falls into the good record keeping category is the cow that has raised poor quality calves in previous years. Usually, cows that produced a poor quality calf last year will produce a poor quality calf again this year. Removing this type of cow from the production cycle will increase profitability of an operation by decreasing the amount of money spent on an unproductive cow.

The third, and final production measure is arguably the most important because producers typically do not realize the negative impact it has on profitability; this is the cow that is a late calver. The cow that calves late in the calving season is often overlooked as a cow that should be culled because many producers may argue that she has done her job, so there is no reason to cull her. However, a proper counterargument is that although she may be “doing her job” by having a calf, she is not doing her job well, which would involve her having a calf at the beginning of the calving season. Cows that are late calvers are less profitable because at weaning their calves are much younger and in most cases weigh much less than calves that were born earlier in the calving period. This is important because bigger calves at weaning typically sell for more money than lighter weight calves. As we stated, yes, this cow is doing her job in a way, but if she is not performing at her best, your operation has a decreased chance of being as profitable as it can be. Cows such as the one mentioned are important to watch for. Just because they appear to be productive doesn’t necessarily mean they are actually making money. These types of cows may lose more money than types previously mentioned because they are kept in the operation for a longer period of time.

These types of cows are important to keep an eye out for in any cattle operation. Using the guidelines mentioned above, a strict culling protocol may be put in place so that each cow is given the same opportunity to be productive, and not one cow is held on to any longer than she should. Culling cows regularly is a very beneficial and profitable management decision that a producer can make. Doing so aids in lowering cow cost by reducing amount of money that is spent on a cow that will not generate a profit. Culling cows also increases the amount of pounds produced per cow exposed by eliminating

unproductive cows from the herd. Simply aiming for large calves at weaning is not always the most profitable decision because “bigger” does not always mean “ideal”. In a future e-mail we will explain the risk associated with not producing cattle that fit their environment. We will also discuss methods you can use to determine if your cows are weaning calves at ideal weights. For help in determining which cows in your herd should be culled, or if you have any questions about a protocol for culling cows, please contact us.