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Can I Feed Out My Cull Cows? By Dale A. Moore, DVM, PhD

At the end of 2011, cull dairy cow prices (Turlock, CA market) were fetching up to $0.72 for high yielding cows and $0.45 for the very low end cows. Many producers are anticipating even higher prices into the future.

A question that comes up from time to time is – can I improve my cull cows and get more for them? There are just a couple of studies that have looked at trying to answer this question.

In a recent study published in the December 15, 2011, *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, investigators from the University of California, Davis, evaluated the effect of a "reconditioning" program for thin dairy cows on body weight gain, carcass quality, and their shedding of bacterial pathogens. Thirty-one cull dairy cows with a Body Condition Score (BCS) of 2.5 or less (on a 5-point scale) were purchased from a livestock market and held at the University feedlot. As they came off the trailer, they were randomly assigned to immediate slaughter (controls), a group fed a high concentrate diet for 28 days or a group fed a high concentrate diet for 56 days.

The initial body weight was about 1,066 lbs on average and all the cows were about 3 years old. The Average Daily Gain for the 28 day group was 0.7 lbs per day and was 3.1 lbs per day in the 56-day group. Hot carcass weight (HCW), dressing percentage, and rib-eye area were much greater for the 56-day feeding group than the 28-day group but no difference between the 28-day group and the cows that were slaughtered immediately after arrival. The 28-day group had significantly lower marbling score than the 56-day group and the control cows.

The total cost of the feeding was $76.77 for the 28-day group and $166.76 for the 56-day group. When all the prices paid for better product and all the costs incurred were determined, there was a net loss of $71.32 per cow for the 28-day group and $112.80 for the 56-day group compared to the control cows. Bottom line is that unless the feedout period is sufficiently great (more than 28 days), the cost of feed much lower, and/or the price differential is very great, it still does not seem to be worth feeding thin cows to improve carcass quality and meat value. One thought, though, is that reconditioned cows may not become debilitated cows that could potentially become downers.

An Irish study looked at finishing" cull dairy cows using a grass silage and concentrated in four different strategies. In systems with low housing costs, the slower finishing systems (based on forage) were more profitable while at high housing costs, faster finishing was more profitable. Thus, the specific farm circumstances would dicate what kind of feeding program would work best.

There still may be opportunity at individual farms to improve carcass quality and its benefits by feeding out thin cows. One producer in Pennsylvania said: "To get the premium for the beef value, we can either focus on making our culling decisions earlier, or look at doing a feeding program to bring her condition back to a higher value." Maybe he is "more right" in the first part of his statement. Can we make more profitable culling decisions and not have to feed these cows? Or can we set up a system on our own farms to realize some profit? The jury is still out.

References

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