## Effective Cull Cow Management for Herd Success: Heather Gessner

## Season 1, Episode 48

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, a podcast from industry experts and progressive producers discussing cutting edge info about the cow calf sector to keep cattlemen and women in the know and positively affect their bottom line.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Madison Kovarna, a beef nutrition field specialist based out of Watertown, and joining me today is Heather Gessner. She has joined us for previous episodes before, but it's always a joy to have her come back and spend some time with me to talk about a variety of topics as she is our SDSU Extensions livestock business management field specialist and primarily works with farm and ranch families on farm management issues that include, but are not limited to livestock budgets and marketing, risk management, estate planning, farm transitions and whole farm business planning. She's joining me today to share some information about the management of cull cows, which can definitely be a pandora's box of conversations. So, hopefully we can provide some good information. I know Heather has some good things tucked up her sleeves and I will just try to keep up with her. But Heather, I will give you a couple of minutes here to introduce yourself to our listeners who maybe haven't spoken with you before or maybe just some history you have with your career here at SDSU Extension.

**Heather Gessner:**

Sure. I've been with Extension since 2001. I tell people I deal with all the death, dying, taxes, economics, marketing, and those types of components of farming, so I get all the fun topics as I've mentioned. A lot of people want to talk about dying, and paying taxes and putting budgets together, and that's really where I focused a lot of my career on, is trying to put some of the economics to common business practices that farmers and ranchers are doing and really looking at them from the point of view of can we do them more profitable and more sustainable for our operations.

**Madison Kovarna:**

It's always a joy to talk with you, Heather, both in a professional aspect, but also just out in the world, outside of maybe our business clothes and that type of thing, getting out of the office and going and seeing each other outside of Extension just because you are so much fun to talk to not only about these more serious topics, but just having a little bit of fun there as well. But, if we move to this cull cow conversation, the cow market this year has been crazy. There's been unprecedented market highs. It's just been doing a lot of things that we haven't seen before, and it's been going on for quite a while and it's got the people thinking more about their cull cows just because of the financial opportunity that we've been presented with the last couple of months. But to start us off, what are some things that come to your mind about cull cow management when this conversation comes to?

**Heather Gessner:** Cull cows are one of those things that we really should be thinking about it more as an enterprise for our operation and less about man. I've got these cows, what am I going to do with them - because they really are a profit-oriented availability for our operations. You know, there are some chances for some profit as we move forward that way. One of the big things that I think we really need to think about from the cull cow standpoint, whether we're culling because they're open after their breeding season, whether they're just aging out of our operation or if they're lame, you know, thin and we don't know why and we can't get them to come back into body condition. We really need to think about which of those cows have the opportunity to improve in value and which of them don't, because if they don't, there isn't really a need, desire or economical benefit to put any more feed to them and it's probably best to take them to the sale barn sooner rather than later and you know get what we can out of them, reduce their drain on the economics of the operation. Then once we decide which cows we can maybe put some improvement to, and by improvement, I mean days on feed, so we're changing fat color whether we're adding 100 lbs or 300 lbs, given how they might come off the pasture in the summer. What are we going to do to improve them and how are we going to feed them because everybody's operations are different and you might put lbs of gain on by running some of those open cows out on corn stalks for 100 days or 200 days or whatever we can get out of our corn stocks. 200 would probably be quite a bit, but we could also look at whether we're going to feed them a full feed ration and we're going to try to jump three lbs of gain on them by feeding a high corn, high energy ration that really puts some gain to them and we get them kicked out with an extra 100 lbs in 30 days. How are we going to add that weight and are we feeding the right cows are some of those important things to to kick off that whole cull cow management considerations.

**Madison Kovarna:**

You brought up a good point about that color, and for those that may not be familiar with that conversation, there are cows when they come off of pasture, typically underneath the hide, the fat that they have there, if they have very much at all can be yellow in color and that's from the beta carotene in the grass. It's natural. There's nothing that is affecting the animal in any way; it just looks a little bit different. If we look at consumer preferences on the meat side for any beef that's coming out of these animals, potentially a yellow fat can be a significant ding in the price that people are willing to pay, simply because it's something that they may not understand. So, getting those cows off of grass and getting some additional feed to them that is not the grass that doesn't have as much beta carotene in it will make that fat turn that more normal white color, that pearly white color we're used to seeing in the service case or from those stakes or anything that comes back from your locker of if you send animals yourself. So when we're talking about that color, that's kind of what we're talking about there, and it's an excellent point to bring up when it comes to cull cow management, Heather, are you willing - if you're going to send these cows maybe to the auction barn, maybe that's something you're not concerned with, but if you are going to sell them to a buyer, that might be something that comes up in a conversation there of how long that they've been off of grass for that. But we know that the cow market follows seasonal highs and lows. Every single year it kind of follows that same peak and valley there. What are some ways that we can meet those through a business strategy or different choices that we make throughout the year to maybe hit more of those highs when maybe some other people are hitting the low points?

**Heather Gessner:**

Yes, there is pretty extreme seasonality in the cull cow market and the fat cows trending lowest from November to January of the following year, generally when people are doing the most of their preg-checking and sending cows to town, so that really follows some of those seasonal trends, and almost every graph that I've put together since I started an extension follows that seasonality. I think the single biggest year that didn't was the COVID years, when we had some just market interruptions all over the place. So, those years can kind of be thrown out of the average there, but a lot of seasonality in that cull cow market. Some things that we might want to think about if we're trying to sell either before the market start falling in November or maybe when they start rallying again in January. If we start looking at some early preg-checking options, if we've got a spring calving operation, if we're doing some ultrasound preg-checking, maybe we can preg-check those cows when they're really early in gestation, cull the cows that are obviously open and start putting those on feed earlier, especially, you know, maybe we're weaning calves a little earlier on those cows as well, so that they're not utilizing their body energy to lactation for those older bigger calves. We wean the calves, we put those cows in the feed lot or especially, if they're not feeding the calf. At that point, let's put some lbs on them, jump up and take advantage of where the fat cattle market is today and some of those cull cow prices and get them shipped to town earlier. We've kind of missed that for the 2024 year here, but if we're preg-checking in August or September, maybe we're sending those cows to town before Halloween hits and we're getting rid of them that way. Plus, we don't have to worry about feeding those cows then when it's cold and they need more energy to maintain weight and put weight on. So really, one of the big things that we can look at is that early preg-check date or if we had a cow that lost a calf before the breeding season. If we evaluate her for her age, if we look at the quality of her udder, her feet and her legs and we're like, “This cow just really isn't a high performer in our operation anymore. Let's put a set of those together if we're losing a couple of calves that way and sell them before we spend summer grass on them. Let’s save our summer grass for the cows that are actually working for us and move those cows out of the operation.” Just thinking about other considerations, we really encourage everyone to start looking at their calving intervals, and if we've got five or six cows that always calve 180 days after the rest of the group, if we're looking at our fifth or sixth calving interval, how can we move those cows up into our operation or maybe we look at making those our cull cows, sending them to town before or after that November to January time frame so that we can take advantage of some of those higher prices that way, and replace those cows with a younger earlier calving cow that fits the majority of our calving season better that way. So, if we're thinking about some of those different ways, just thinking about when we're sending cows to town based on our calving season, I'm not saying everybody needs to change their calving season to June, March, or November, but think about how it fits for your operation and how can you avoid those seasonal lows is something that we can put some pencil to and really look at the economic situation that's going on there.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Making sure that we're thinking ahead to take into considerations those seasonalities that you brought up is while we may have missed this year to really take advantage on the 2024 cycle, taking this information that we're learning now and thinking ahead throughout next breeding season into the summer like you said is something that I think can really jumpstart us in our business management. I always say that our cow should work for us, not the other way around. We should let those cows be cows and work and go and do the things that we are asking of them. We shouldn't have to kind of hold their hand as they're going through this process and kind of getting rid of those freeloaders that are making things a little bit more difficult, the ones that maybe don't necessarily breed on that first cycle, even though everybody else in that group does, or one that just always has the calf that performs a little bit at the bottom of our benchmarks here. Maybe the cow that just isn't standing out to you every year, maybe if we put that onto paper, those benchmarks really aren't working in her favor and making sure that everything is documented because I'll admit, sometimes getting rid of the one cornerstone cow that you've had for a long time and the one you may be bonded with a little bit more can get a little emotional and you can always find that one little detail to make her stay. So, when you really start putting all those things out there, it's just not economical to keep her around and kind of keep that feed bill going for her if we do want to remain profitable and sustainable in our businesses. I've already kind of mentioned it a little bit, but certain years we’re faced with additional variables that impact the amount of cull cows we have, such as drought, you know, impacting our pasture quality or maybe we lost some pasture ground and we don't have as much ground to graze or our winter feed supply has changed as well. But what are some economic benchmarks that we can use to make these decisions easier? In your opinion, Heather, what are some things that we can kind of keep our eyes out for to make these decisions a little bit easier to swallow?

**Heather Gessner:**

I’ve mentioned some really big ones that are kind of the heartstring tuggers. You know, you've got that old 4-H heifer or the one cow that survived when you didn't think she was going to so you tried to keep them coming along through the herd. But we also have to really start looking at the real business part of our operation and what's profitable that way. If we start looking at those cows as that enterprise source we need, we can start with average weaning weights. If the average weaning weight for your herd is 500 lbs, but you've got some older cows that you have a hard time parting with and you're looking at them and they're weaning a 250-pound calf, she's using all the same feed stuffs as that middle-aged or younger cow is using and only bringing in half the profitability. So, looking at that economic decision and saying your profit on a per cow basis is really critical that way. Those older cows might not be cutting it that way, and maybe that's where you're looking at. They've still got all their teeth, so we can add some weight to them and increase our per 100 weight as a slaughter cow, in that manner. So, really thinking about that as an option, that average weaning weight can come into play as a benchmark when we're looking at the genetics of some of our older cows. Maybe we've improved our average bulls, the bulls that are covering our cows. We've improved the average weaning weight in the EPD section by 10, 15, 20 lbs. So, our calves have the potential to grow faster from those younger cows, versus our older cows. So, maybe we're looking at it from that component as well, just really thinking about input costs and the value that babying those older cows and putting them in where we're feeding our breed heifers because they just need a little more help in nutrition. Well, that more help in nutrition, like you said, they should work for you. If we're giving them that higher plane of feed for a smaller calf, again, we're not really putting the profitability where it really needs to be. So, some of those considerations related to the feed that's available, the feed quality, I guess, that we're feeding those cows so that we can keep them going and keep them through with some of our fairly harsh winters up here in South Dakota. You know, really putting the economics to that and saying, “Yes, this cow needs to go. She's costing me $50.00 more to keep than the cow standing right next to her,” and if she's costing more to keep, that probably means her calf is a whole lot lighter come leaning time as well, so she's not bringing in the money either. So, the economics of raising cows isn't why a lot of people want to raise cows. We like raising cows. The book work behind it is where it gets a little harder and a little tougher to think about, but especially if we've lost pasture or we've lost grass production due to drought, fire, or something that reduced our available grazing, we really need to get back to the dollars and cents’ worth of that operation and figure out which cows are making us more money and where maybe we need to part with some of those friends and and move on to the next generation.

**Madison Kovarna:**

So it is important to remember that the cornerstone cows doesn't need to be here forever because she's already made that impact on your program. If she was performing really well as a four-year-old, we can't really expect the same out of her if she's 10,12 and plus. So, it's sad to see them leave, but they've made that impact on your operation and that's a little memento that I like to keep with myself as we back home recently got rid of my cornerstone cow. So, that was a difficult choice to make. But in reality, when you started to look at it, it just wasn't economical for her to be there, and we already had her impact there and she had served her purpose well for us during that time. You had brought up a lot of considerations with different input costs, but I wanted to ask you, is there any input cost that maybe are less common that people consider? Maybe ones that fall through the cracks that we're not necessarily thinking about throughout the year? If you don't have an answer for that one, I know I'm kind of venturing off here, but just maybe some ones that are less common that people think about when making these decisions.

**Heather Gessner:**

You know, we start thinking about things that are missed that we don't put into our budget. If we're thinking about making changes to our operation, including all of those components, sometimes we miss them. So, for instance, if we're thinking about making improvements to our calving intervals, how are we going to make those improvements? Probably through the use of some type of synchronization program, so that we can bring those later calvers up into the operation. So sometimes, those get missed; additional costs of additional bedding or housing if we're calving more head in March and April, when we have a potential for wet winter storms coming through. Sometimes that gets missed. Bedding costs are often time missed in those calving decisions. Other things we want to make sure that we're thinking about, maybe we do our own preg-checking in the fall of the year. But if we're going to go to ultrasounds in late summer to do some of that earlier preg-checking, we got to make sure that we add that into our budgets and our planning. The other thing that really I think gets missed is we're making decisions kind of on gut feel of how we're going to feed these cull cows, when instead maybe we come up with three different feeding alternatives and we look at the prices that we can receive four cows that weigh 1200 lbs, 1300 lbs or 1400 lbs, depending on what we're feeding them and how long we're feeding them and what that value is. So, those different budget comparisons oftentimes get missed in our decision-making process as well. We look at one option, we say, “Yes, that'll work,” and we run with it. Whereas we might be able to maybe we can put a whole lot of gain on by grazing corn stalks with a protein tub instead of putting them on full feed and having those costs added into the situation as well. So, some of those are the ones that get missed. Additional trucking and some of those things are oftentimes missed in a budget too but we could probably have a whole conversation on what needs to go into creating your budget and figuring out what those cows really cost you.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I'm going to be honest, I'm not sure a lot of us want to hear [Laughter] how much it costs us to run a cow just with the feed costs and all the other things. I think sometimes that could definitely catch us off-guard. Like you said earlier, a lot of us raise cows because we find it fun. While the budget stuff necessarily kind of does suck the fun out of it sometimes, when you start to put numbers to everything, it is an important part of our business management to do to make sure those numbers are there. We are getting close to the end of our time together. So, I did want to kind of turn the floor over to you if you had any closing thoughts or questions that you might have that we can kind of maybe flip the conversation as well. So, I'll leave the floor to you, Heather.

**Heather Gessner:**

When you're thinking about those cull cows beyond the seasonality of the prices is just really evaluate what you're trying to do with your operation. In a drought, we have these emergency cull procedures in place. Maybe we need to be looking at some of those cows that are on the emergency list and make a more pro-active cull cow situation so that we can keep the average age of our cows down, keep replacing those older cows with good genetics and really reduce the number of cows that we have to sell because of bad legs and maybe lameness and those types of things because we're moving them out in a more efficient, more profitable manner. Also considering the humane thing to do for some of those cows, instead of having older cows that are now having hip issues and some pretty big aches and pains going on, maybe we're sending those to town sooner rather than later and watching them lose weight and saying, “Okay, now she's finally done, and she's done everything for us.” Maybe we can take some of that away from the situation as well. So, just really evaluate what your feedstuffs and your feed resources are. Take a look at the genetic potential of younger cows and evaluate what those weaning weights are and calving dates and see if we're getting the most profitability out of our cow herd each and every year for every cow.

**Madison Kovarna:**

You brought up an excellent point when we start talking about structure of our cows, typically those older ones are the ones that maybe have their udder quality fall off the bench there for us. It starts to really decline, and it makes harder for calves to nurse, and if they maybe don't have the disposition that we're looking for either; if we have to help those calves nurse, that becomes extremely difficult and potentially a dangerous situation. Another thing I like people to think about when it comes to the age of their cows is their teeth. So, what they're using to eat with – and every once in a while, when I was a kid, I find a molar in the feed bunk, and I thought it was the luckiest day of my life that I found one. You know, as cows age, they start to lose those teeth and when they get to a certain point, are they able to intake the nutrition and utilize it properly as they get up there in age? If we reach that point, is it better just to kind of send them on their way before we watch them drop condition exponentially and then end up looking at them. It's getting cold and starting to wonder if they're going to be able to keep warm through a South Dakota winter. So, those are definitely some good thoughts to bring up as we end this episode. I want to thank you, Heather, for joining me on this podcast. I've had a great time learning more about cull cow management and maybe some more behind the scenes thoughts that we can have with ourselves to make these choices a little bit easier, kind of take that emotion out of that conversation as well. Maybe not completely but make it a little bit easier to make. I hope our listeners will take advantage of the information you have shared with us and improve their cull cow management strategies or maybe start to think about different ways that they can manage those cull cows throughout the year. With that, this has been Cattle HQ brought to you by SDSU Extension, headquarters for all things beef cattle. Visit extension.sdstate for the latest beef information. Until next episode, stay curious and keep learning.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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