

How to get more income from the dairy cow's last crop: **BEEF**

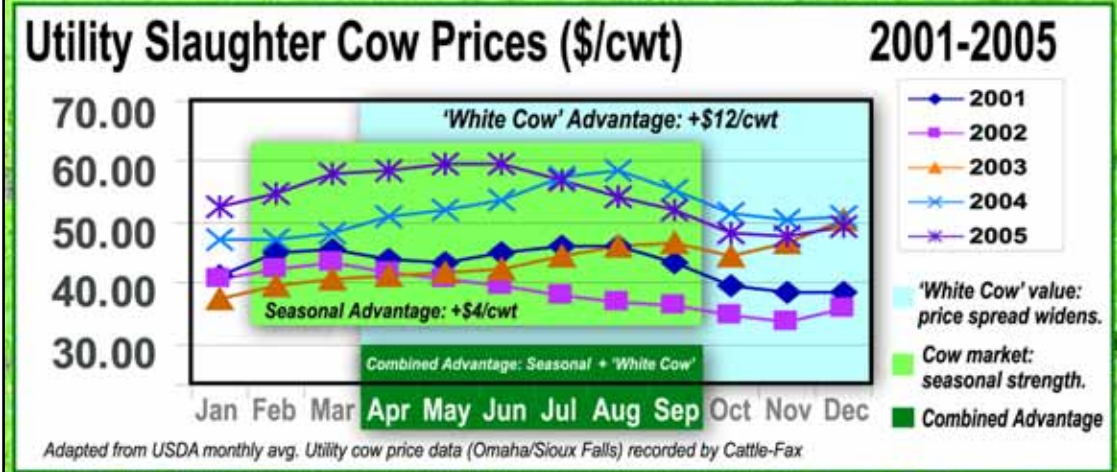
Looking for a few hundred extra dollars? Try beefing-up dairy cull cow condition before marketing.

Weight, body condition, meat quality, mobility, and a dry udder, make a huge value difference — especially this time of year from April through December — when buyers expect to pay a bigger price difference between cows with less condition and cows that meet beef quality standards of special 'White Cow' programs.

After all, why sell market cows at \$40-45 per hundred pounds live weight, when they could bring \$55-\$60? That's a price difference of \$225 on a 1500-lb animal.

'White Cows' not only bring more money per pound, they also weigh more. Here's the conservative math: 90-days of feed and rest with average daily gain of 2.5 pounds per day = 225 pounds x 55 cents per pound = \$124.

A diet consisting mainly of milking herd bunk refusals is a low-cost way to put on pounds and quality.



This chart shows the months of seasonal cow market strength and the months when the price spread widens in favor of highly sought-after 'White Cows.'

There are several months of overlap, where the benefits of good condition offer the biggest payback to the dairy farm's bottom line.

The bottom line: extra pounds plus extra dollars per pound, can add up to a \$350 advantage on one market cow. If sold during the over-lapping months of seasonal strength in the cow market (April to Sept.), the combined advantage can be even better.

"Beef is the last crop we get from our cows but too often, we as dairy farmers just write it off. With a few

extra steps, we can get those extra dollars in the end," notes Phoebe Bitler, who along with her husband Dave and son Jesse, manage and milk 100 registered Holsteins at their Vista Grande Farm near Fleetwood, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

"The decision to treat a cow or remove her from the herd is a tough one," she admits. "Once we make that decision, we want to see a body

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condition score of 3.5 when she goes to market.

“As dairy farmers, we tend to think we’ll get a few more dollars by milking that cow a little longer, but we end up getting shortchanged more on the beef dollars. Sometimes the treatment doesn’t fix the cow. Then it’s best to stop milking her, take the stress out of her life, put her on a grass or dirt lot or bedded pack, feed her a TMR of trough cleanings from the dairy barn, and just let her get over it... to recoup some real value on the beef side.”

Abe Harpster also thinks about market cow value in the culling decisions from the 2,000-cow herd at his family’s Evergreen Farms in Spruce Creek, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania.

The beef value of the dairy cow, says Harpster “is not something most dairy farmers are aware of. What I hear from cattle buyers and

packers, is that we dairy farmers hang onto our cows (in the milking string) too long. In the past, we’ve put some culls on-feed to get condition on them before marketing. Today with full facilities, we concentrate more on making our culling decisions sooner, to market them before they lose weight, value, and marketability.”

Pennsylvania has two large beef processors: Cargill (formerly Taylor Packing) in Wyalusing and Smithfield (formerly Moyer Packing) in Souderton. Both offer premium cow beef programs. The Cargill-Wyalusing plant harvests 1,900 cattle per day, of which 75% are market cows. Their ‘White Cow’ program has been around for 10 years.

“Right now, the White Cow market offers a big price spread — adding as much as 12 cents per pound. This may widen even more

in the coming months,” confirms Drew Wilkins, procurement manager for Cargill Meat Solutions-Wyalusing. “The premium tracks right along with the fed steer markets, which are higher now during the growing season.”

This is also the steak-grilling season, and the ‘middle-meats’ drive the value. “The good color and eating quality of the beef from the White Cow program, offer an ‘in-between’ product to foodservice customers: good quality beef, but not as expensive as steer beef,” he confirms.

There are three classes in the Utility grade for cow beef. “The bulk of the White Cows are in the Boning Utility 2 class, with average fat cover and also some thickness and muscling to them,” Wilkins notes. “For the average dairy farmer, a Boner 2 is best described as a cow with a body condition score of 3.5.”



“ 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.

Abe Harpster, Evergreen Farms, Spruce Creek, Pa., is a Pennsylvania Beef Council board member. He sends market cows twice weekly from his 2,000-cow dairy herd, concentrating on making the culling decisions sooner, in order to sell before cows they lose weight, value, and marketability.



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Phoebe Bitler, Vista Grande Farm, Fleetwood, Pa., chairs the Pennsylvania Beef Council board of directors. She and her husband Dave and son Jesse manage a dairy herd of about 100 registered Holsteins. She wants to see a body condition score of 3.5 when her cows go to market. Whenever possible, the Bitlers give their market cows 60 to 90 days on-feed because they have found that it definitely pays to sell cows in good condition.

A White Cow will also have a dressed carcass weight of 700-900 pounds and must meet a marbling requirement in the ribeye. This is accomplished with some time on-feed.

Cornell University beef cattle extension specialist Mike Baker, studied the economics of 70-90 days on-feed before marketing dairy cows. The animals were fed low-cost feed refusals, including some grain. Gains were very efficient at 2.5 to 3 pounds per day, adding about 200 pounds to the live weight.

“If the cow is eating quality feed, not being milked and with no calf inside her, she’ll put on weight,” Wilkins observes. He encourages 100 days on-feed, but some producers will find it more practical to feed their market cows for 60-90 days. The optimum number of days on-feed will depend on the animal’s

condition to start with, and the reasons for culling her.

“A feeding program for the performance culls makes good sense,” says Wilkins. “These are animals that won’t breed back or low producers that are not milking well. Most of the White Cows we process are dairy cattle because of the high-energy diet, which improves the condition and the marbling. It also gives good color to the meat and the fat. We’re looking for fat that is closer to white (not yellow) and meat that is closer to cherry red (not dark). That’s what feeding will do for you.

“We’re able to capture more value from this kind of meat, and pass this value back to the dairy farmer. When the cows are sold on a grade and yield basis: the farmer can reap the benefit of the true value of the animal.”

Buyers at the auctions also know good cows when they see them. So even if a dairyman sells to the auction, his cows in good condition will attract bids.

“Time on-feed definitely brightens up the fat,” says Wilkins. He also notes that certain feeds promote yellow fat. “This is one of the reasons why we see a bigger price spread in the summer. There are fewer White Cows this time of year because cattle are hitting the grass, or they’re getting fresh chop instead of dry hay and fermented forages.”

This seasonal change in diet can cause diarrhea and dehydration, which is one of the causes of dark meat. Changing feed to a different type or quality increases the probability of dark meat that is unappealing to consumers. It won’t make it in the White Cow program.

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Time on-feed also provides rehabilitation: for the lame cow to rest and regain good mobility before transportation; for large, distended udders to dry down; and for treated cows to be cleansed of illegal drug residues before marketing.

Mobility is very important when marketing cull cows: when lame animals become non-ambulatory (downers) during transit, they are condemned by USDA inspectors and become worthless.

At Vista Grande Farms, whenever possible, the Bitlers rehabilitate their market cows at least 60-90 days, before sending them to market.

“When the slips come back, we see how well it pays,” she notes, pointing out a ‘project cow’ they have currently in the meadow with the heifers.

“She had reproductive issues (and a deformed foot), and even though she had excellent production records, we made the decision and stopped milking her. Buyers knock

the price for cows with big, baggy udders. The grass lot is wonderful therapy, and the time out here will dry her down to a flat udder and improve her mobility. At the same time, feeding a balanced TMR using trough cleanings from the dairy barn, gets the weight and condition on her,” says Bitler, who serves on the BQA Commission and chairs the Pennsylvania Beef Council board.

“When we give cows too many chances, we end up on a slippery slope where they can go downhill fast. Then, the easiest solution is to just sell the cow and not bother with her, but we’re giving up significant dollars when we do that,” she maintains, adding that having a place to put the market cow(s) during the feeding period can be a challenge.

On some farms, pasturing may be the most workable solution, but the cow will also need quality feed in order to gain weight, improve condition, and have quality beef that meets the ‘White Cow’ standard.

Abe Harpster’s solution is to focus on very timely marketing. He moves cull cows to market twice weekly and relies on close monitoring and a good record keeping system to sell cows in good condition.

“We have a good handle on what each cow’s production is and a good team of people knowing the health of the animals. We know what each cow’s problems are, how many times she may have had a problem, what her production is, and how many days she is in her lactation. This helps us make timely decisions to move our cull cows when they have the greatest market value,” says Harpster, who is also a Pennsylvania Beef Council board member.

“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.”

Either way: it definitely pays to pay attention to the beef value of dairy market cows.

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