

Texas Dairy Matters

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WHAT DO CULL RATES SAY ABOUT YOUR DAIRY?

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The cull rate is a number that is often used to gage the status of how well a dairy operation is performing. Usually, a low cull rate indicates that a dairy operation is doing well, and a high cull rate suggests that there are problems on the dairy operation. However, the use of the term “cull rate” can be misleading and may not provide any indications of how well a dairy operation is actually performing. On the other hand, focusing on the reasons why cows were culled can provide insight into the operation.

Cull rates can be divided into two main categories: voluntary and involuntary. Involuntary culling is when the cow is removed from the herd due to a reason over which the producer has no control, such as a death or other major health issue. Voluntary culling occurs when the producer chooses to sell a cow because it is more profitable to replace that cow with a different one.



Although the term “culling” generally has a bad connotation, voluntary culling can be a positive decision for dairy producers. For example, if a herd at maximum capacity has a 10 year old cow with below average milk production, it would be a profitable choice to sell that cow and replace her with a healthy heifer that just calved and is already producing more milk. In cases such as this, the decision to cull the older cow is a profitable one and is the best decision to make, even though the decision to remove this cow from the herd would raise the cull rate. If cows are culled to make room for more profitable animals or if unprofitable cows are retained in the herd, cull rates, whether they are low or high, are very poor indicators of how well the dairy is actually doing.

When cows are culled involuntarily, however, there is an entirely different picture. Cows that are removed from the herd due to substantial health issues or death often result in lost profits for the dairy. The reasons why cows are involuntarily culled need to be looked at closely. Are a large percentage of the cows culled for mastitis? Are they dying due to an illness? Are feet and legs problems the reason the cows are being culled? The timing of when cows are leaving the herd also needs to be examined. If a large percentage of the cows leaving are less than 60 days in milk, it is time to revisit the fresh cow program. High rates of involuntarily culled cows indicate that there are opportunities for improvement on the dairy.

Evaluating the reasons that cows are leaving the herd can help to target the management areas that need more attention on your dairy. Remember that looking at the cull rate for your dairy does not always indicate how well the dairy is doing, but the reasons why cows are culled often reflects the management on the dairy.