

Canada's Cull Cow Dilemma

By Michael Wheeler

According to Canadian Cattlemen's Association statistics, over 700,000 head of cull cows would be sent to slaughter on a normal year in this country. However, as any livestock producer knows, 2003 was far from a normal year. Canadian cattle producers are often faced with serious economic hardships. Now, a new dilemma which has been simmering away quietly is about to reach its boiling point. This is the cull cow dilemma.

BSE and drought have left farmers with some difficult decisions and now these 700,000 cull cows per year have become a burden to beef producers. This begins to raise some questions about the quality of care and welfare of these animals.

Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy has left producers with few options for the disposal of their cull cows. BSE has obliterated the cull cow market to the point that these animals are almost worthless. The majority of cull cows are older females which do not meet the under thirty month age requirement for the export of their meat to the United States. Many producers are trying to keep and feed their cull cows with hopes that perhaps they could produce another calf or that their market value will improve.

Many of these animals suffer from health problems, which could reduce their quality of health to an unacceptable level. Some of their most common ailments include arthritis, cancer eye, feet and leg problems, and fertility problems. With current market prices, the cost to treat any ailment accounts for a large portion or the total value of the cow. This leaves producers to decide whether they should do what is economically feasible and leave the animal untreated, or whether they should do what is ethically responsible and carry out the best treatment plan.

Responsible producers have decided that the health of some of these cull cows has deteriorated to a point where it is best to euthanize or slaughter them on farm. These reports of euthanasia do not sit well with some Canadian consumers because they feel the animals are being wasted. They also raise questions about whether these animals are being euthanized in the most humane way possible. It is very important that producers and the media reassure consumers that proper procedures are being followed in the best interest of these animals.

On top of the BSE crisis, cattle producers in many parts of western Canada were also faced with another year of drought and feed shortages. Adding to the problem, many farmers are faced with larger than expected herds to feed because there is a limited market for breeding and feeder cattle and virtually no market for cull cows, which would have normally been sold in the fall rather than being fed over the winter.

Some farmers can not afford to purchase feed because of their reduced income due to low cattle sales. In some cases, the sale of cull cows accounted for up to twenty percent of producer income. Tight feed supplies often lead to protein and energy deficiencies, but mineral and vitamin deficiencies are also very common as supplements often seem too expensive to purchase. Producers should remember that by saving a few dollars in the sort run they are costing themselves more money in the long run, as these deficiencies often lead to more health problems and the likelihood that next year there will be more cows to cull.

As the winter progresses and with the extreme cold temperatures in January it is expected that feed supplies are running out faster than expected. Animal welfare agencies are anticipating an increased number of complaints because of the market conditions and low feed supply. There have already been a number of cases of malnourished animals reported across the prairies.

The survival of Canada's cow herds, and their managers is being put to the test this winter. Through all this turmoil, the only thing that remains certain is that Canada's beef producers almost always have the best interests of their animals at heart.

A swift, long term solution must be found for these animals to ensure that they will continue to be managed with an acceptable level of care despite the tough economic conditions.