

DAIRY PIPELINE

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"Just like a straw of semen or the success of an artificial inseminator, bulls are in control of the future production and offspring of your herd."

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WHAT LEVEL OF MILK PRODUCTION IS BEST FOR DRYING OFF OR CULLING A DAIRY COW?

With all the increases in feed cost, it is time to reevaluate the proper level of milk production at which to dry off or sell a cull cow. The two most important factors to consider when making this decision are feed costs and milk price. Other contributing factors are forage availability and overcrowding. If you are short on forage then it may be more beneficial to dry off or sell cows earlier than the breakeven milk production to avoid running out of feed. If the dairy is overcrowded, the extra cows may affect the milk production of the entire herd and thus they should leave the lactating string earlier than their breakeven point. The easiest way to determine if overcrowding is an issue on your farm is to dry off and/or sell 5-10% of your cows at about the same time. Then, observe what happens to the bulk tank milk weights. If the bulk tank weights stay about the same or even increases a little you will

know that overcrowding was affecting milk production. Table 1 shows the breakeven milk production levels to dry a cow off for several different levels of milk and feed prices.

Table 2 shows the breakeven level of milk production to cull a cow. Several assumptions have been made to model the breakeven point. The first assumption is that a cow at this level of milk production will eat approximately 85% of the herd average dry matter intake. The second assumption is that feed costs make up 90% of the variable cost of milk production for these cows. As mentioned before, it also assumes no overcrowding. It is important to note that even with the same input data there is a different breakeven level of milk production for drying off versus culling—the difference is due to the fact that you still must feed dry cows.

Lactating Cow Ration Cost (per cow per day)	Dry Cow Ration Cost (per cow per day)	Mailbox Milk Price (per hundred weight)	Breakeven Milk Production (pounds)
\$4.00	\$1.25	\$14.00	17
\$6.00	\$2.00	\$20.00	19
\$6.00	\$2.00	\$18.00	21

Table 1. Breakeven Milk Production level for drying off a cow

Lactating Cow Ration Cost (per cow per day)	Mailbox Milk Price (per hundred weight)	Breakeven Milk Production Level (pounds)
\$4.00	\$14.00	27
\$6.00	\$20.00	28
\$6.00	\$18.00	31

Table 2. Breakeven Milk Production level for culling a cow

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WHO'S YOUR COW'S DADDY?

As temperatures rise and field work takes us away from our cows, herd reproduction may suffer and pregnancy rates may decline. Rising feed costs along with milk prices dictate that we manage days in milk to maximize feed efficiency. Every year after corn silage harvest I receive many calls saying, "I am way behind on my breeding, do you know where I can find a good bull?" This year consider evaluating your bull breeding program before too many of your cows are open.

Even though artificial insemination can offer a greater opportunity for a herd's genetic advancement, the use of natural service bulls is still prevalent in Virginia. If you are going to use bulls in your dairy herd they must be managed properly and safely. Just like a straw of semen or the success of an artificial inseminator, bulls are in control of the future production and offspring of your herd. Following are a few management strategies that you should use.

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"The costs of days open are higher than ever."

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Bennet Cassell

Bennet G. Cassell
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Safety should be the number one consideration in management of bulls. No cow pregnancy is worth serious injury.

- Select a bull from a reputable, "disease-free" source, just because he is the right color and walks doesn't mean he is a good bull. Pedigrees are a plus.
- Bulls should pass a breeding soundness exam before he is to breed cows and this exam should be repeated at least four times a year, this also presents an excellent opportunity for you and your veterinarian to discuss your herd's reproduction plan.
- Bulls should be on the same herd health program as the lactating herd. Work with your veterinarian to formulate a plan that compliments your herd bulls.
- A conservative stocking rate is one bull for every 25-30 cows. Social rank may affect bull performance, avoid grouping smaller bulls with larger bulls, as the larger bulls may dominate the breeding and inhibit younger bulls lower on the pecking order.
- No bad temperament should be tolerated. There are too many bull calves born every day to take a risk with an ill-tempered bull.
- The use of younger bulls should be preferred. Feed is too expensive to be feeding an old, big bull.
- Make sure all family members, employees, and visitors are aware of bulls, and use precautions when working around them. Dairy cows are handled frequently, offering several opportunities for a bad bull to "get you."

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MAKE AN EXTRA EFFORT TO GET COWS BRED

"We live in interesting times" appears from time to time in graduation speeches, properly attributed to an author whose name I have forgotten. It certainly applies to the Virginia dairy industry in Summer of 2008. Costs of feed and fuel and changes in consumer preferences for milk supplies are shaking some very basic assumptions about how to manage dairy cows.

I have been watching subtle trends in the state rolling herd average for milk for a number of months. Each month's "test period milk lbs. added" is just a bit less than the month dropped from the previous year. Cows are giving slightly less milk this year than last. Why such trends exist is always complex, but high costs of concentrates is involved. Producers feel that they must rely more on home grown forages or locally produced grain supplements than in the past, and those inputs won't always support previous yields. BST is not the option it once was to sustain milk yield in prolonged lactations. In the past, low concentrate costs

and BST reduced the costs of extended days open, but the rules of that game have changed. Record keeping programs like PCDART can help avoid those 150 day intervals to first breeding. Track all cows after calving and have a protocol to breed most of them at 70-80 days in milk. There are still many systems and options available to re-breed cows in the lactating herd. One key component is a frequent and consistent vet check program. Monthly vet checks are probably the minimum for Virginia sized herds (about 160 cows today). Even more frequent vet checks lead to more timely intervention on problem cows.

Most dairy farms have or can acquire the resources to shorten interval to first breeding. The benefits of reduced days open remain the same - fresher, more productive cows and additional heifer calves. The costs of days open are higher than ever.

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