

Exit Strategy



Five ways to maximize the decision to give dairy cows a career change

BY MAUREEN HANSON

When it's time for dairy cows to make a career change and leave the herd, strategically planning their exit could enhance their final contribution in terms of meat quality, carcass yield and overall profitability. At the same time, their departure could be improved in terms of their own welfare and the safety of their end products. Here are five factors for consideration:

1. SEASONALITY

Many producers choose to thin their herds in the fall to save on bedding and barn space through the winter. But Ohio State University Extension educator Dustin Sonnenberg says a 10-year survey of USDA data showed market dairy cow prices are typically lowest in November and December. He says that is likely due to the concurrent sale of culled beef cows after weaning in the fall. The USDA history showed the months that historically have posted the highest prices for market dairy cows are March, April, and May.

2. CARCASS YIELD

It is a given at least 10% of the U.S. beef supply is fulfilled by dairy cows, but it's important to recognize their role in other cuts. Sonnenberg says market dairy cows with moderate body condition yield higher quality carcasses that can be processed into boneless primal cuts.

A study led by Nicole Berdusco at the University of Guelph divided 37 dairy cows removed from a commercial herd into a group that was marketed immediately and one that was fed for an additional 60 days. The fed cows gained an average of 188 lb. and showed a body condition score (BCS) improvement of 1.2 points (5-point scale).

A second study led by Berdusco, published in the *Journal of Dairy Science*, followed a similar structure with 43 cows, half of which were fed for an additional 60 days. Those fed cows averaged a hot carcass weight that was 179 lb. heavier, with a 6.5% greater dressing percentage, compared to cows that were shipped immediately.

3. CARCASS QUALITY

The cows in Berdusco's second study also had significantly higher intramuscular fat, or marbling, than their non-fed counterparts. When steaks were evaluated using a Warner-Bratzler shear force protocol, they also were significantly more tender.

4. ANIMAL WELFARE

Berdusco's 37-cow study evaluated udder involution, showing that nearly half of the fed group experienced udder involution, while none of the direct-shipped cows did. No significant difference in locomotion or hock lesions was detected between the two groups, but in other settings, retaining cows on feed might also allow them time to heal hoof, hock or leg injuries.

5. FOOD SAFETY

Sonnenberg notes that retaining market cows on feed for several weeks also will ensure that drug withdrawal times have expired, which promotes safety for both consumers and the dairies selling the animals. **BV**