Even if we were not facing drought conditions, this would be a good time to consider culling your cows heavier than normal. Many livestock producers have not realized it, but we have ended the longest cattle cycle in history and started a new one. A cattle cycle initiates when the cattle inventory begins to increase and continues until it begins to increase again. The last cattle cycle lasted 14 years with the previous one lasting 12 years.

When prices are high the cowherd is generally growing. Producers have been keeping their older cows longer than they might otherwise and retaining more heifers than they normally would. The result of this is more steers hitting the ground, which translates into more pounds of beef reaching the grocery stores causing lower prices for everyone.

So the question for livestock producers is, “How am I going to survive with lower calf prices?” This is easily answered with “Either raise income, lower expenses or both.” So how can a producer achieve either of these options? One answer is to cull their cows heavier than they have been. This will generate additional income for this year and also reduce operating expenses.

The issue then becomes how much will income drop due to the fewer number of cows. If the cows culled were older cows, they were probably costing more than the other cows and more likely not to have a calf. So the reduction in income might not be as bad as expected. I have had producers tell me that they did not see any significant reduction in income due to heavier culling.

With the drought facing everyone this year, now might be a good year to start culling those older, unproductive cows from the herd. Cull cows are still bringing good money today, but it won’t be that way for long. Once the drought is over and pastures have recovered, producers will likely find cheaper cows to buy back.