

STRATEGIC CALVING SEASON

John Dhuyvetter

Calving season is set by when bulls are turned out and kept with the breeding herd. Calving seasons vary from herd to herd based on decisions for when they want their cows to be calving. Across the northern plains this might be in midwinter (January and February) to early summer (May and June). The decision should be strategic to best fit resources and management alternatives. Winter and early spring calving remain popular with purebred and some mixed farming operations, but there is increasing interest and a move to calving later by many larger cow calf operators.

Simply changing the date cows are exposed to bulls can result in a lot of associated impacts. To move a herd to a later calving time frame is fairly simple, just delay bull turnout. To move a herd of cows to an earlier calving season by earlier bull turn out won't be so effective. Since most cows won't return to estrus until close to 60 days post calving, simply having the bull in the pasture doesn't mean they will all be ready to breed and will calve earlier next year. This postpartum interval can be shortened somewhat by feeding and tends to be shorter for cows calving in the longer day length time of the year.

A lot of consideration is given to what may be the best time of year to both calve and breed to lessen weather challenges of cold, wet, mud, storms and heat. The varied weather experienced, illustrates there is no ideal time that fits every year. This year February is brutally cold, we experienced late April storms a year ago, and many Marchs we have thaws and mud. June tends to be our rainy month and sweltering August heat isn't favorable to breeding especially if pasture quality is low from drought and water becomes marginal. Certainly cold weather calving is only practical where sheds and facilities exist to protect newborns.

Available labor and feed quality are two primary considerations. Many operations make cold weather calving work by yarding the herd, maintaining a bedding pack, sorting heavies close to calving facilities, and diligently checking and moving calving cows into protection. While cows are checked to assist problems and process new calves in warmer months; it will be less intense and easier as losses from hypothermia aren't likely and it becomes feasible for less manpower to handle larger numbers of cows. Secondly, winter calving cows will be lactating under dry lot fed conditions until pasture turnout. Peak lactation and cold weather nutrient demands are high; to maintain cow condition and prompt breed back they need to be fed higher quality forages and supplements than the late gestation cow. While March calving shortens the drylot lactation period, weather necessitates similar labor and facilities.

The advantages for early calving are bigger calves in the fall and lowering labor conflicts with field work. Early born calves can often be weaned in early fall at heavy pay weights, often desired by feeders for early feedlot placement and finishing to take advantage of stronger markets. Early calvers also find advantage for conducting AI breeding programs at a time of year prior to putting cows out on summer pasture. Higher revenues can be expected without having to over winter and grow feeder calves, if calf losses can be minimized. Intense labor at calving,

appropriate facilities, and a strong herd health program with facility sanitation, can minimize losses.

A move to late April and May or June calving has risen out of need to operate larger herds, or part time herds with less labor and infrastructure costs. When field or pasture calving is done, less bedding and manure cleaning is required along with being able to feed less expensive winter and spring rations, as peak nutrient demands will be on pasture. Generally less calving problems and calf sickness is encountered, but planning for adverse late year storms needs to be considered. It is common to yard calve heifers ahead of the main herd for greater supervision and ability to deal with problems. For operators farming, less time can be devoted to the calving herd. The primary disadvantage is lighter calves at typical late fall marketing/weaning times. The reduced feed expense (possibly \$50/cow) won't likely offset lower calf weight and revenue (estimate of \$100/calf). Some alternative weaning and marketing considerations are warranted. With high quality early winter grazing as cover crops, regrowth hay field, or swathed annuals, weaning might be delayed till year end to market heavier calves. More typically calves might be weaned at traditional times and backgrounded for several months in the lot prior to selling. Summer born calves might be both late weaned and lot wintered for summer grazing.

Most cattlemen have adapted a breeding and calving season that works for them. There is not a right or wrong time in black or white but in shades of gray. There are lots of considerations and moving parts; labor, facilities, feed cost, feed quality, calf weight, calf value, calf sickness, calf losses, pregnancy rate, etc... Some calve when they do because it is the only option that is feasible with their resources and constraints. Others with options have economically weighed the disadvantages with the advantages and chosen when they calve. As situations change often with an operations structure (size and people) or where production problems persist (calf loss and breeding rates) it warrants reconsideration of when to breed and when to calve.