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BeefTalk: Changing Calving Date Can Impact Income Opportunities

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The jokes about April Fool's Day have come and gone for another year. For North Dakota beef producers April 1 is a milestone, marking the midpoint of the calving season when producers review the last 20 years of calving records. One popular topic of discussion among cattle producers is when calving should be.

For non beef producers, this may seem to be a minor point, but in the beef business, the entire enterprise, and perhaps lifestyle, revolves around when calves are born.

Weather has the biggest impact on calving time. At least in my lifetime, I remember the severity of the winter by how each winter impacted the

calving season. With calving, you always need to go outside. Saying "I will wait for a better day" is just not acceptable.

After tough winters with difficult calving weather, the discussion focuses on turning bulls out later. Generally, when the winter is mild everybody just breathes a sigh of relief.

Long-term statistics indicate producer attitudes do change and, as a result, so do calving dates. Despite the weather, I would guess the factors influencing calving dates are much more complicated than just the flavor of last year’s weather.

Data collected through the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) shows the average date for calving is April 1. A closer look reveals the date has, however, varied over the past 23 years. Coming out of the 70s, calving was almost a week later than average (April 8), and started getting earlier in the 80s. This trend continued well into the mid 90s. The average calving date for the years 1978 to 1980 was April 8. For 1981 to 1983 it was April 6. For 1984 to 1986 it was April 4. For 1987 to 1989 it was April 1. For 1990 to 1992 it was March 28. And for 1993- 1995 was March 28.

Generally, in the free market, economic incentives drive production decisions. I would speculate the need to cover costs resulted in the desire to produce larger calves, which prompted a shift to an earlier calving date. There were, and still are, two ways to produce large calves:

- First, focus on and select for those genes that increase rapid growth.
- Second, calve earlier and market older calves.

The current supply in the industry is a combination of both factors. Cattle cycles are directly affected by management protocols that have halted the gradual trend of calving earlier. From 1996 to 1998, the average calving date moved back to April 4, which indicates producers are trending back to calving the same time as they were in the 70s.

The change in calving dates also impacts output (calves weaned per cow). Simultaneously, reduction in costs, also need to be measured. As NDSU emeritus economist Harlan Hughes stated, "Unit cost of production is the herd's total costs divided by the herd's total pounds of calf produced. Any production factor you want to talk about is either in the numerator, the denominator or both."

If we were racing cars, a yellow caution flag would be waving. Decreasing the denominator, i.e. total pounds of calf produced, will increase unit cost of production, if the numerator, i.e. total costs, remains the same.

Bull selection and turn out dates have major impacts for beef producers. Changing these parameters should only be done after some serious pencil pushing.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0032.

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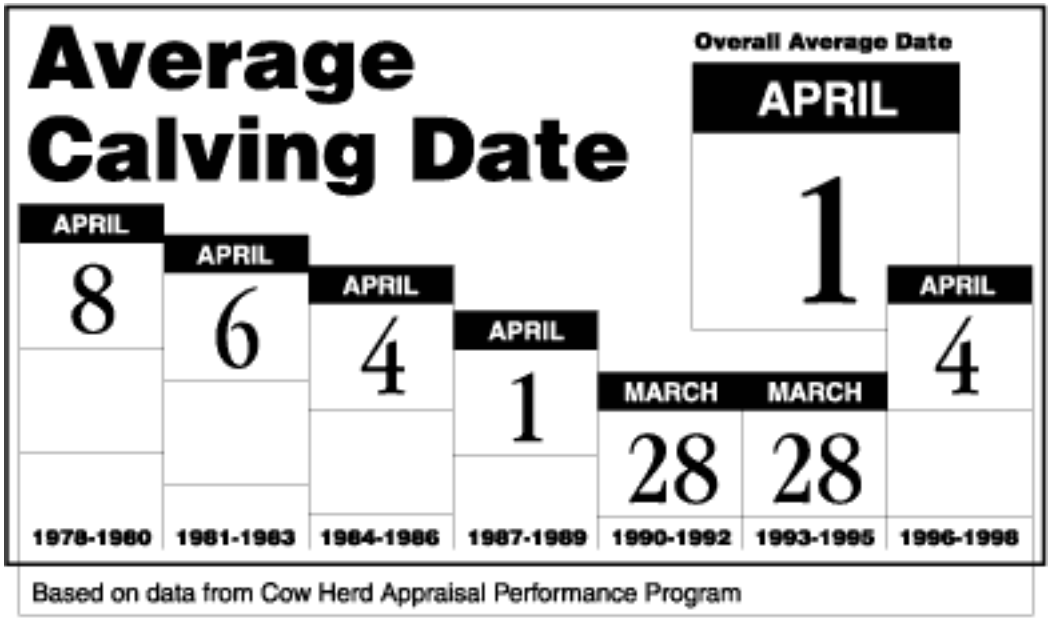

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