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NDSU Extension Service

## **BeefTalk: Is Management or Genetics Responsible for Slackers?**

**By Kris Ringwall, Extension Beef Specialist,**

The cows and calves are definitely taking on the fall look. The moods of cows and calves are very seasonal. Early in the spring they gaze into the distance, each cow seemingly determined to take her calf and search for the cover of a rich, green cranny surrounded by spring grass. By midsummer, the calves have long graduated from the crannies, the grass is not as green and there is never enough milk to sustain the calf.

As summer wears on that attitude among the cows seems to change from one of hope and conviction to matter-of-fact resignation to getting the job done. For those of you who have raised teenage boys--or for that matter college boys--you know the syndrome. Will it be one quart of milk or two?

Can you imagine the endless sensation a cow must go through? Of constantly being drained? Not only is the high-moisture grass dried, but the local pond is no longer the fountain of youth quenching the endless thirst. But time goes on, peak milk demands lessen, and the cow and calf mutually co-exist for the rest of the summer.

But as the air starts to chill it heralds change for the cows and calves. Cows sense this change, wandering the pastures and checking the gates facing home more often. Finally a gate-opener arrives, by truck or by hoof, and cows and calves are heading home.

After every move, a couple of weeks go by before cattle fully settle in. Today, after driving through the cows at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center Ranch, it was obvious they were in the fall mood. Full of crop residue, fall grass, weeds and corn, the jog to the water tank was just a bit slower than normal. A couple of extra beeps on the horn were needed to keep moving. A steer calf bent his neck and bellowed back, making me wonder if he really was a steer.

The calves look good with many in the 600 and 700 pound range, but there are never enough of them in that category. All the calves, except the May/June calves, were weighed prior to shifting pastures. Of the 302 recently weighed calves, two calves weighed over 800 pounds, 33 calves weighed over 700, 101 calves weighed over 600, 82 calves weighed over 500 pounds, 50 calves over 400, 29 calves over 300 pounds and there are five calves that don't even weigh 300 pounds.

With still three weeks to go before weaning, and the anticipation of above average daily gains (2.5 plus pounds per day), all but 40 or so calves should be over 500 pounds. In today's cattle business, we still have too

much spread in calf weight.

Of the bottom 34 calves (those that weigh less than 400 pounds), 27 are out of 2-year-old heifers, six are out of 3-year-old heifers and one is from a 10-year-old cow. The mature cow herd is doing quite well, but the Center needs to rethink the management of first-calf heifers. A common management practice is to calve heifers before the main cow herd because calving problems are easier handled alone, and the earlier a heifer calves the more likely the heifer will breed back on time.

These are two good thoughts; however, keep in mind the nutritional plane for these heifers really goes up after calving. She needs to recover from calving, keep growing and produce milk for a hungry calf. Heifers need high quality feed in March and April, 30 days longer than the mature cows. Because they are competing with older cows, heifers often do not get the nutrition necessary--and the weights on the calves seem to verify that conclusion.

For cattle enrolled in the Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software (CHAPS) program, the typical 3-year-old cow calves 13 days later than the 2-year-old. Three-year-old cows calve three days later than mature cows. As attention is drawn to the main calving herd, it's essential that individual care needs to be maintained for the young mothers of the herd.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.BeefTalk.com](http://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](http://www.CHAPS2000.COM) on the Internet. In correspondence about this

column, refer to BT0061.

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Pre-Weaning Calf Performance	
Late September to Early October	
Calf Weight (pounds)	Number of Head
> 800	2
700 to 799	33
600 to 699	101
500 to 599	82
400 to 499	50
300 to 399	29
200 to 299	5

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