

When Should I Turn Out the Bulls?

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“When should I turn out the bull(s)?”

That is the question of the season, a question that may be the most important question a producer ever asks. Well, maybe not the most important because “will you marry me” may trump the question.

The decision when to turn the bulls out certainly is the most controllable event impacting a beef operation. Yes, the seasons of the year are the determining factor, but are not controllable, so those questions that directly interact with Mother Nature impact the beef operations tremendously. Agricultural operations take a very conservative business approach and statistics show there is little change in core management. So why the question?

For those who utilize the CHAPS program to evaluate their individual herd performance, the calving distribution table is triggered by the date the third mature cow calves. The calving distribution table prints out the number of cows that calved in 21, one-day periods. The table is quite helpful in monitoring yearly progress or lack of progress in maintaining a targeted calving season within the herd.

In reviewing the average dates of the herds processed in-house at the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association since 2000, little change has occurred. The average date the third mature cow calved in 2000 was March 12, in 2001 it was March 10, in 2002 it was March 10, in 2003 it was March 13, in 2004 it was March 13 and in 2005 it was March 13 again.

The data reflects that producers, at least those who utilize the CHAPS program, have not made any real change in the date calving starts. Even though individual herds may have changed, the middle of March remains the general time period producers want calving season to start. The question of “when to turn the bulls out” is not going to go away. Complicating the issue is the fact that a producer cannot effectively move to an earlier calving date without major cow turnover.

Even though calving time has not changed dramatically, attitudes are changing primarily due to an aging work force and a shortage of labor. Regardless of the reason, when current producers find themselves with off-farm obligations, they are short effective backup help and the absenteeism creates difficulty when the cows are calving. Frankly, the backup labor pool isn’t available.

A typical conversation between producer and cow would go like this: “Can’t you do this yourself?” the producer asks. “Hey, I’m not the one who opened the bull pen,” the cow responds. So now is the time to at least ask the yearly question about when to turn the bulls out.

The balance is heavily weighted by the typical 2.38 pounds per day that a calf gains while nursing. For every 30 days the bull turnout date is backed off, a potential 70-plus pounds of calf is lost in the fall, unless calf weaning or at least the sale date is adjusted backwards.

So, Old Man Winter is waiting at both ends of the equations. The question needs to be answered, “Do you want to deal with the weather while the calves are newborns or later as weaned calves?”

The popular answer still remains with newborns and the bulls going out as usual, but the question lingers. As more pondering occurs, maybe something is out there to tip the scales to later calving. Maybe we just need to get a little older.

Whatever the answer, a good cow is a remarkable mother, so in the meantime, don’t make excuses for poor cows. Sell them.

May you find all your NAIS-approved 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 BT0293.

**Average
THIRD MATURE COW
Calving Date**

Year	Date
2000	March 12
2001	March 10
2002	March 10
2003	March 13
2004	March 13
2005	March 13

Note: The date the third mature cow calves is the date the CHAPS program utilizes to start the Calving Distribution Table for monitoring reproduction.