

That Cow Wasn't Supposed to Calve Today

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



For most beef producers, the final days of the last trimester of pregnancy for their cow herd is here. For some early bird producers, calves are already bucking and jumping. Winters like this one are great (keep your fingers crossed) and temporarily lay to rest all the discussion of when to calve.

Often, producers question when a particular cow is due. Most producers have a handy calving table that projects the calving date of the cow based on the day she was bred. For example, the IRM Pocket Reference guide shows a cow bred May 21 is due to calve on March 1.

In recent years, the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center has targeted March 1 as the start of the calving season. Do the cows begin calving on March 1? Unfortunately, the cows do not read the tables. Basically, a cow will calve when she and her calf decide the time is right.

We have all seen the old cow that gets up, lays down, gets up, lays down, walks over to the corner, walks back, lays down, twitches her tail and calves two weeks later. Or the cow with no udder that calves in what seems to be minutes and successfully produces a normal, well fed day-old calf.

A current trend is to advertise cows for sale with predicted calving dates. These dates were projected based on ultrasound measurements and are used to imply the cows or heifers should calf over a period of seven to 10 days. Establishing the age of a developing fetus with ultrasound is very accurate but gestational age and calving date have little in common.

At the center, ultrasound records help us sort cows based on 21 day reproductive cycles. No attempt is made to actually guess which day a cow is going to calf.

In reviewing cow records, center research specialist Keith Helmuth compiled all the cows with absolute breeding dates and sire of calf. In other words, 462 cows were artificially inseminated, and conceived to the unit of semen she was inseminated with. Because of the different breeds used, the parentage of the calf is not

questionable. No DNA test or judge was needed to identify the father.

Of these 462 cows, the average gestation length was 282.5 days. Of the 426 cows, only 87 actually calved on the expected date. These cows were expected to calf 283 days after breeding or March 1st. In reality, the first live calf arrived Feb. 11, then one on the 13th and one on the 16th. Three calves arrived on Feb. 17, three on the 19th, one on the 20th, three on the 21st, nine on the 22nd, eight on the 23rd and a rush on the 24th produced 17 calves.

The calving crew is starting to sweat. On the 25th, 19 calves were born, 36 on the 26th, 38 on the 27th, 39 on the 28th and finally the due date, March 1, 87 calves were born. More sweat, despite the cold weather. On March 2, 53 cows calve, on the 3rd, 25 calves, on the 4th, 16 calves, on the 5th, 22 calves, on the 6th, 20 calves, on the 7th, 15 calves, and on the 8th, only four calves. Just as there appeared to be a let up, on the 9th, 15 calves were born, on the 10th, 12 calves, and on the 11th, one calf. Finally, a slow down and the season finished with two calves on the 12th, three calves on the 13th, four calves on the 14th, and one calf each on the 15th, 16th and 17th. The last two calves were born on the 19th of March.

All 462 cows conceived on the same day, but the calving season lasted 32 days. Approximately, 80 percent calved within a 11 day window, 95 percent in a 19 day window and 98 percent within a 28 day window. If you want to bet me you know when your cow is going to calf, I will bet you she won't calf on the day she is due. Cows don't calve in a 7 to 10 day window, no matter who thinks they should.

Happy calving. 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 BT0078.

When Will Cows Calve?
462 Cows All Bred on May 21

Dates	Number of Cows Calved	Percent Calved
February 24 - March 6	372	80%
February 20 - March 10	439	95%
February 13 - March 14	456	98%
February 11 - March 19	462	100%

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center