

Very Dry Years Can Trigger Early Weaning of Calf Crop

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Perusing the world of data is not all that easy and often creates opportunities for one to head off in a zillion tangents. That is how it was when I wanted to see how annual precipitation in North Dakota influenced weaning dates.

I started with a simple question: what was the annual precipitation for North Dakota the last few years? Locating the data was not too difficult because the North Dakota State Climatologist Web Site and several other weather related sites were easy to find, but finding a summary of the data that would answer the question caused some tension. I found enough data to fill what seemed like a case of letter size paper printed on both sides. The old saying *if I can't see the tree because of the forest* or for beef producers, *if I can't find the cow because she was just absorbed into the herd*, certainly held true.

Today we were trying to find calf 2142 so we could take a picture. I was certain we had read every tag in the pen, but no 2142. Eventually, there he stood with a very shiny 2142 ear tag. It seemed as if he was grinning at us then. I can't say for sure that he actually knew we were looking for him, but cattle seem to have a natural sense for such things. Perhaps it is their survival instinct; if you even give the slightest hint you are actually looking for a specific cow or calf, instantaneously, the selected critter is absorbed into the herd.

That is how I felt about the data from the Internet. It is on the screen one moment and then, poof, gone the next. Eventually, after a couple of deep breaths, I found a site and the annual precipitation from 1948 to 1999. In the 21 years from 1978 to 1999, nine years have been above normal in precipitation and 12 have been below normal. Normal is defined as the average state precipitation from 1950 to 1990.

Years when precipitation was above normal, the average calf weigh day for those producers involved in the North Dakota Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software (CHAPS) record program was Oct. 18. During the dryer-than-normal years, the average weigh day was Oct. 20 – two days later than the wetter years.

In general, simply dry weather conditions were not a trigger to early weigh and wean calves.

A more defined data set, however, showed that when only the five driest and five wettest years are looked at, weather did trigger early weaning. The five years with the greatest precipitation were 1982 with 21.4 inches, 1986 with 22.0 inches, 1993 with 22.9 inches, 1994 with 21.1 inches and 1998 with 22.1 inches of precipitation. The average calf work day for these years when precipitation averaged 21.9 inches was Oct. 21.

The five years with the least average precipitation were 1979 with 14.8 inches, 1988 with 11.7 inches, and 1989 with 14.3 inches, 1990 with 14.4 inches and 1992 with 14.9 inches of precipitation. During these extremely dry years (precipitation averaged 14 inches), CHAPS producers worked calves on Oct. 16, approximately five or more days earlier than during the more wet years, but only two days earlier than the 20-year average weight day of Oct. 18.

In conclusion, currently Dickinson has received more than 12 inches of precipitation this year. As fall approaches, the indication would be to pull calves early. Fall rains could arrive, which could stall weaning. In other parts of the state and region where drier conditions exist, cows and calves need to be worked early, with a good plan developed to bring the calves home or perhaps to the neighbor with a good set of feeding facilities.

Perhaps the single most impediment to early weaning is simply the lack of facilities, creating the dilemma of light-weight calves selling for greater per-pound prices, but netting less per head which contributes to the general reluctance to pull calves early. It is truly a tough decision, but again, check with your neighbor.

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 BT0104.

Average Calf Weigh Days* for Wet Versus Dry Years in North Dakota

1978 – 1999 Average	October 19
9 years with above-normal precipitation	October 18
12 years with below-normal precipitation	October 20
5 years with the most precipitation	October 21
5 years with the least precipitation	October 16

* Data from North Dakota Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software (CHAPS) record program.