

Managing Within the Circle of Life

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Today is a nice calving day but ranchers know the weather on any given day does not have to conform with last year, the year before or any other year. A March Monday ago, I was sitting by my computer, soaking wet. The ground was still partially frozen; it was raining cats and dogs; water was seeping into the basement. I was to be traveling, but instead stayed home to try to dry off and prevent a potential slide into the ditch via ice as the moisture arrived at 32 F.

We have seen many extremes this March. On the 8th, the temperature was 21 below, with dew points even lower. Just over a week later, the sun was shining, the air 60 degrees above with a full afternoon of outside work. And then, nature's thunder let us know spring is on the way.

The last time it rained this much in March was 1902, when we received more than 3 inches. In 1897, 1904, 1929, 1945 and 1987, the average March precipitation was more than 2 inches but less than 3. Yes, heavy rains in March are rare.

Last year, many of our fellow cattle producers dried out, and now this year a March rain only seen by our forefathers. Mother Nature has a plan but doesn't share all the details. Among all this unpredictability, someone calls and wants to change their calving date. So when should we calf? There are more questions than answers.

For the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, the cows are calving. Data shows with each lower degree in temperature, and additional drops of moisture, the ability to survive becomes more questionable. This year, unprotected calves froze to death in early March. A week later, calves born could very well chill to death, a much slower process but with the same end result.

Every season life and death interchange places at a fairly fast pace. How many birds set up home, lay eggs and hatch a family, only to have one miserable cold night take everything away. Spring rains bring life to everything,

including us, by regenerating the soils and replenishing the springs. The price: today's death is tomorrow's life.

As custodians of nature's plan, the exchange can be numbing. Every living thing has only one goal: survive and reproduce. Regardless of the effort needed or the impact to the individual, cows and ranchers struggle forward.

Sacrifice is not a question for the spring robin preparing to produce and feed a nest of fledglings. Just like the robin, those questions are not even a thought for the cow; there is only the action. And so the need to establish a proper time to calf, balanced between enough time to grow and meet top market dollars against life-giving and life-taking spring weather, remains. Ranchers may turn inward, questioning their capacity to interchange with Mother Nature: one for her, one for me, but the one for her can literally be a life-changing moment.

The frustrations of nature challenge my inner core, but I probably don't understand. The robin builds a new nest, raises a new brood. The cows calve, most of the calves grow and the ranchers of this world value again the circle of life.

So when should we calf? The Dickinson Research Extension Center had been holding steady at March 1. With increasing concerns for waste management, labor and overhead expenses, the Center is focusing more on calving with less human intervention. This year calving was backed off to start on March 11, just a week before the 100 year rain. Next year, March 22? When should I calf? A complex question, no simple answer.

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 BT0136.

March Precipitation 1892 – 2002

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center

Long term average

0.7 inches

Years average precipitation was greater than 2 inches

1897, 1904, 1929, 1945 and 1987

Years average precipitation was greater than 3 inches

1902

Current March precipitation

2.4 inches

