

## For a Real Weather Report, Ask Your Grandparents

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The discussion of when to calf continues. No decision has more bearing on the flow of a beef cattle operation than when calves arrive.

Cattle do not adapt well to total confinement management systems. Traditionally, cattle have not paid the bill when overhead expenses accumulate, in particular those capital type improvements with large price tags. Producers are familiar with attempts to streamline cattle production through vertical integration. Most of these attempts to control cattle in confinement, however, are now in the past tense.

Cows and calves are ruminants and they seem to live up to what they were designed to do very well -- eat grass. Grass, as we all know, occurs in vast areas, requiring ruminants to harvest it.

In the wild, seasonal reproductive patterns have developed in many species, assuring the delivery of a newborn just prior to a surge of nutrition supplied by timely rains and grass growth. In our best interest, we actively try and predict when the best period should be.

I asked NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center animal scientist Jim Nelson if he had any tips on the weather. I quickly realized the old saying "You ain't seeing nothing yet".

The center began keeping weather records in 1889. It is one of 50 benchmark weather stations in the United States. The 110-year average precipitation for the Center is 15.8 inches per year. The wettest year on record was 1941 with 31.2 inches of precipitation, and the driest year was 1936, with 6.7 inches.

That year, 1936, was not a very pleasant year. You would need to visit with anyone in their late 80s to confirm the facts: 1936 was not only the driest year on record, but had the coldest and hottest temperatures recorded. On Feb. 16, the thermometer dipped to minus 47 F and reached 114 F on July 16.

I guess we all complain about the weather, but I suspect not many of us have really felt the brunt of the worst of it. The shortest growing seasons on record were in 1915 and 1917 with 69 days and the longest growing season was

in 1962 at 175 days. The earliest killing frost was August 9 in 1917 and the latest killing frost was June 20, 1969.

Producers recognize that extremes don't occur very frequently, but knowing what can happen can help them plan a safe buffer for long term risk. The truth of the matter: there is no absolute safe period to calf.

In general, January through March are colder, but dryer months. April, May and June see a steady increase in temperature as well as precipitation. Following June, precipitation declines with December being the driest month of the year. Traditionally, cattle producers have calved starting in March and finishing in April in western North Dakota.

Throughout our long history of inhabiting the northern plains, we are still trying to figure out the best time to calf. For the Center, our target is to have 60 percent of the calves born before April 15 and the remaining calves born before May 15. The death of winter is generally passed, and the opportunity to position 60 percent of the calves for excellent gain on cool season grass starting May 1 is important.

Likewise, it's just as important to finish calving soon enough so summer grass is still nutritious enough to support gain when the cows reach peak milk production. It is a balancing act, with no absolute answer. The discussion quickly ends as the checks from last year's calf crop arrive. The calves were born earlier in March and the first steers were on rail by March of this year. How quickly one forgets last year's calving frustrations with a little cash in hand.

But back to the bottom line: never underestimate Mother Nature.

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 BT0137.

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# Weather Highlights

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center

Event	Year	Measure
Precipitation	110 year average	15.8 inches
Driest year on record	1936	6.7 inches
Wettest year on record	1941	31.2 inches
Coldest day	1936, Feb. 16	- 47 F
Hottest day	1936, July 6	114 F
Shortest growing season	1915 and 1917	69 days
Longest growing season	1962	175 days
Latest killing frost	1969, June 20	27 F
Earliest killing frost	1917, Aug 9	30 F