

Before the bulls go out, Ask “Is this the right time?”

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Beef cattle production seems relatively simple. In some people’s minds, the cows are fenced in an area that has growing plants and then the cows eat the plants and produce a calf. The calf is sold and the cow produces another calf. Without a lot of thought, when the plants are no longer evident, the cattle have feed brought to them or are moved to a feedlot.

It sounds too simple to be true. You are right, it’s not true. The reality of the cow-calf world pivots on understanding the world of plants. The many interactions among individual plant species, the soils where they grow and the climate required to sustain each plant species will determine the success of a cow-calf producer.

In addition, as the world becomes more populated, not only must the producer match the plant environment with the cow, the producer has the added difficulty of accounting for and distributing waste products produced by the production system in a manner beneficial to the local biosystem.

Matching the local environment with a beef production system requires considerable skillful input and thought by the manager of an operation. The Dickinson Research Extension Center is pondering the interaction of the many approaches to the cow-calf business and how a producer interacts with the managed land, forage base and subsequent waste products.

One could assume much of this knowledge is at hand; however, after reviewing various sources, the concluding decisions still are left with a fair bit of seat-of-the-pants judgment.

Current thoughts include several questions. When is the appropriate time to calf? The center starts calving the main group of cows the third week of March. Labor requirements at calving have pushed calving later and later for many producers. Perhaps the center should compare late-March calving with early-May calving. Some producers would even suggest June is a good time. The center’s experience would indicate that late-season pastures might not sustain milk production for those actively growing June calves.

March-through-May born calves seem to fit the plant-

growing season in the northern Plains, starting with the availability of cool-season grass May 1 and subsequent native range or mixed grass pastures starting June 1.

Secondary questions about the calving dates center on growth rate and marketing time for the calves. Should the growth rate of March-born calves be different from May born calves? Should the targeted end point be an excellent fall calf, a calf maximizing growth rate destined for the feedlot and harvested at 12 to 14 months of age? On the other hand, should the end point be a slower growing calf, a calf with more of its diet based on forage, destined to enter the feedlot at 15 to 18 months of age and harvested at 20 to 21 months of age?

Depending on the system, how large a frame does the cow need to have? Various sized mature cows require different amounts of feed to cover general body maintenance requirements. Cow size in combination with bull selection directly determines the makeup of the calf and perceived value in the marketplace.

Obviously, each system requires different inputs, such as labor, equipment, genetics, etc. The answer is found in the ability to merge needs and factual data to produce a profitable system that feeds the world and sustains the producer’s family.

“Why now?” one might ask, but choices for change come infrequently in beef and forage systems. Even when they do, the change window is small. The calving date is determined by the bull turnout date. Each year a producer needs to do some soul searching before the bulls go out. The producer needs to ask, “Which beef and forage system should I use?”

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 BT0243.

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