

BeefTalk: I'm Getting Too Old for the Chicken Dance

Producers surveyed this spring anticipate delaying bull turnout this summer by nine days.

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North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association members have a recorded an average daily gain of 2.52 pounds for calves on summer pasture. This means the 70,000 calves measured through the NDBCIA's CHAPS program cumulatively gain on a daily basis 176,400 pounds, 1,764 hundredweight or roughly 88 tons.

These statistics are especially pertinent following the tough winter and spring we experienced. These challenging weather conditions translate into more work and, for many producers, higher than normal calf death loss.

The natural reaction is to pull back and delay bull turnout so calving will take place later. A look at data from the 2003 through 2007 CHAPS program shows the average bull turnout date was June 9, with a predicted beginning calving date of March 19 (based on a 283-day gestation). The actual average calving date for those herds was April 3.

Producers surveyed this spring anticipate delaying bull turnout this summer by nine days. Is that a good thing to do?

We already know the average daily gain for summer calves is 2.52 pounds. The net result is that for every day that bull turnout is delayed, producers will have one less day of calf growth.

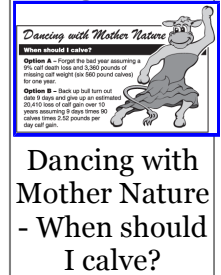
The delay means 176,400 pounds of beef for these 70,000 calves will not be realized. CHAPS benchmarks show a producer with 100 cows usually weans 90 calves (6 percent open cows, 3 percent calf death loss and 1 percent abortions and other losses).

If the bulls are turned out nine days later, a producer gives up an estimated 2,041 pounds of calf in the fall (nine days times 90 calves times 2.52 pounds). Imagine a producer with a 9 percent calf death loss because of tough weather. A producer needs to sit down and think through the numbers.

The additional 6 percent loss, or approximately six calves for this 100-cow herd, is actually six times the average weaning weight for each calf. The benchmark value for the 70,000 calves in the CHAPS program is 560 pounds, which means producers would lose 3,360 pounds because of the six additional calves that were lost.

Producers need to evaluate if the risk of losing 3,360 pounds of calf reoccurring is greater than the planned management change of moving the bull turnout date back nine days. If we have a similar winter and spring next year, backing up the calving date to avoid difficult weather would be good.

Images



However, if these events only happen once every 10 years, backing up the calving date would amount to an estimated 20,410 pounds of lost calf gain (10 years times 2,041 pounds), while the one bad year resulted in 3,360 pounds of lost calf gain for that particular year. In that case, the answer would appear to be to leave the calving date as is.

No simple answer exists. One could back up the calving date nine days and wean nine days later and actually wean the same amount of calf. This sounds good, but an early snowstorm on a bunch of bawling, freshly weaned calves is no good, either.

The bottom line is that ranching and farming is a dance with Mother Nature. We asked for the dance.

I would like to think the dance is a nice, refined waltz, but a fast two-step or maybe a wild polka is to be expected. Unfortunately, the "chicken dance" is thrown in every so often. Hold on to your hats because no one really knows just when and where the dance will end.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, we are settling on bulls going out the week of June 15 for the mature cows. The bulls will go out to the breeding heifers the last days of May. That puts next year's mature cows on a schedule to start calving March 25, which is a few days later than we have been.

I guess I'm getting too old for the "chicken dance."

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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Attachments



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(bto43009.pdf - 33.69 Kb)



EPS - Dancing with Mother
Nature - When should I calve?
(bto43009.eps - 436.49 Kb)