

BeefTalk: Bulls Furloughed Until Mid-July

Why Dead Calves?

Too many cows, not enough space, not enough help, not enough bedding, not enough feed and not enough time!

Time to furlough the bulls for later calving.

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Just as the weather changes, so do agricultural operations. There are long- and short-term plans, but the actual work generally is somewhere in the middle. Planning is important because, without a long-term plan, it is very hard to have a short-term plan.

The long-term plan is more goal oriented, while the short-term plan is more procedural. The discussion of calving date is a real example of a question caught in the middle of long- and short-term planning for many beef producers. The goal is fairly well-known. As cattle producers in the northern Plains, the goal has been to have 3- to 4-week-old calves ready to turn out to pasture. These calves are ready to gain weight and do well mowing through the cool-season grasses followed by delicious warm-season grasses and finally some fresh fall regrowth for dessert.

The result is typical northern calves gaining more than 2.5 pounds a day and weighing in excess of 635 pounds at roughly 7 months of age. With typical bull turnout dates the first week of June, the cows start calving early to mid-March. For many beef producers, 85-plus percent of the cows calve within 42 days from the start of calving, so essentially, almost 90 percent of the calves are on the ground, worked and ready to turn out to cool-season grasses, such as crested wheat grass, May 1.

Following a few weeks at home in the backgrounding lots, these calves sell well late fall and early winter. Feedlots are anxious for their arrival and completion always has been good for these calves. Thus, for most producers, the long-term goal is to sell as many of these performance-oriented calves as they can, then settle into winter and get ready for the next calving season.

Even in the most critical coffee setting, those who were successful with this production model never budged. The process works. "Don't fix what is not broken," was the conclusion of the day. However, times are changing and, for some, the short-term goal has been more like, "Let's simply get through this winter."

Too many cows and not enough space, help, bedding, feed, time or just plain not enough result in dead calves. If one were to ask what a typical calf death rate is, the current benchmark for those producers who utilize the CHAPS program through the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association is 3.26 percent, or three to four dead calves per 100 cows.

A benchmark is a notation for pondering and, we hope, it can add some confidence for some self-assessment. At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, a pattern has slowly developed. With a typical traditional management approach at calving, the center has a 3 to 4 percent calf death loss. Pondering that number and reflecting on the typical number the CHAPS producers achieve across North Dakota, one would conclude that the center also is typical.

Being typical does not mean one cannot improve or be better, but does it mean one needs to watch costs closely because costs may go up exponentially as one tries to approach a zero percent death loss. So maybe typical also is a good guide for practical. However, having mentioned costs, the center has and continues to move calving from the traditional practices to more extensive, less labor-intensive inputs and to a more "mother and nature process."

The trend in calf death loss for these cattle has not been positive. In fact, the calf death loss seems to be more in the 6 to 8 percent range. Essentially, this means the doubling of calf death loss. Twice, as severe northern winters directed their wrath at the center, calf death loss has exceeded 10 percent. The labor savings are difficult to advocate, given the center's attempts at a more extensive, less labor-intensive calving system during March in southwestern North Dakota.

The bottom line: More labor is not coming, costs are increasing and so is the value of live calves. The only thing that is not increasing is the value of a dead calf. Long-term goals have been set. However, short-term objectives are not being met, so long-term goals need to be modified. The center will be calving later, so the bulls will be furloughed until mid-July.

May you find all your ear tags.