

## BeefTalk: Bulls Furloughed Until Mid-August



### Late Calving Opportunities

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Plans change. However, with change comes the need to tweak them as they are implemented.

It was not that long ago (early April) that the Dickinson Research Extension Center decided to furlough the bulls for a month. As the breeding plans were being finalized and additional discussions were held, the bull turnout dates were set for mid-August. The change pulls the center's calving date further from the grips of winter and closer to the warmth of summer.

No one is hiding from the fact that calving times are subject to weather, as are all events in life. Yes, calving can have its bad days and the weather can be difficult. However, the consensus was that it was time to move to a grass-based operation. That consensus was arrived at with a little advice and lots of thought speckled with a little bit of data.

The data part is difficult because the ability to find good calving research is skimpy. There is a lot of good, solid research on many beef cattle topics. However, other management practices and a lot of personal opinion often confound the comparison of calving dates. This makes the data difficult to interpret.

In the process of deciding what calving date to use, the ability to set up even a small test requires resources beyond what the center has.

As producers, the deciding can be even more difficult because, once the calving date is changed, the ability to go back is very difficult. Historically, as cattle producers, at least 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 and do well in cool-season grasses, followed by warm-season grasses and then fall regrowth.

In reviewing the outcomes, typical northern calves gain more than 2.5 pounds a day and weigh in excess of 635 pounds at roughly 7 months of age. With historic bull turnout dates the first week of June, the cows start calving in early to mid-March.

For many beef producers, 85 percent or more of the cows calve within 42 days from the start of calving. This means 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, on May 1.

With the new calving dates, the challenge will be to maintain a profit while trying to understand if the previous outcomes still are possible. Of course, the obvious response is a notation that grass-fed cattle production reduces costs, so even though the above production expectations may not be met, the bottom line continues to be the same or, as some would claim, even greater.

Being a bit hesitant that survival solely rests on the control of expenses, one needs to project some numbers that include both expenses and income.

We can project direct costs at \$400 per cow per year. The bulk of that number (75 percent) is projected to be feed inputs. Overhead is projected at \$100 per cow. When we combine those numbers, the center has projected total costs of \$500.

The grass-based cowherd needs revenue because there are two sides to each equation, so estimated cow-calf gross margins will need to be greater than \$500.

No one wanting to be in the beef business would want to make a change in the operation to simply breakeven financially. Therefore, if net profit is to exceed \$100 per cow, total costs need to be reduced by \$100 per cow or income increased by \$100. Perhaps the answer is both options working together to establish a viable beef cow operation.

The question, at least for those around the planning table, focuses on the possibility of a grass-based system meeting expectations. Obviously, simply calving 60 days later with calves that continue to gain 2.5 pounds a day means it takes 150 pounds of calf out of the existing business plan if no new plans are put forth to carry the calf beyond the traditional selling dates.

This is the ripple effect of changing the calving dates. Many other things, if not all things, need to be repositioned to accommodate the new calving season. Price the calf weight at whatever one wants to, but for easy figuring, at \$1 per pound, the gross margin just went down \$150.

The bottom line, if one wants to change the calving dates without making other adjustments within the operation and still plan to walk away at the end of the year with net profit of \$100 per cow, you would need to cut total production costs in half.

I suppose this could be accomplished, but the question simply opens new management doors for enhanced gross margin per cow while still cutting costs. Now let's find the beef system that can do that!

May you find all your ear tags.