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BeefTalk: Proactive Cow Penning



Being prepared makes changes more tolerable and less stressful.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

A beef producer needs a set of "liquid cattle" - the group that is easy to round up and sell as weather changes, feed becomes short or the labor force changes.

Selling this group creates opportunity for the remaining herd by lessening the demands on the operation. Life does not always go the direction that we want. And so, there may be truth in the saying, "one person's loss is another person's gain." But with good planning, both should gain, even if the challenge was not desired.

Images

Lazy L Calving Distribution Sample Herd Numbers

Age	First 21 days	Second 21 days	Third 21 days	Fourth 21 days	Late
2	84	13	1	0	0
3	37	14	0	4	3
4	21	14	1	1	8
5	25	9	0	5	5
6	19	3	3	1	5
7	7	4	1	1	1
8	18	15	6	4	7
9	10	15	2	3	1
10	2	3	6	0	0
11	20	3	8	0	1
12*	3	1	0	0	2

An example of proactive management is when a producer evaluates cow-calf numbers and determines in advance how many pairs should be turned out to grass and adjust the inventory accordingly.

Lazy L Calving Distribution (Sample Herd Numbers)

columns

BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Proactive Cow Penning (2017-05-18) Being prepared makes changes more tolerable and less stressful. [FULL STORY](#)

Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Do You Have Any Dietary Restrictions? (2017-05-18) Dietary restrictions can make eating and menu planning a little more difficult at times. [FULL STORY](#)

use of releases

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Good advice I received when I started with the North Dakota State University Extension Service was plan 70 percent of your day and leave 30 percent open to respond to the issues of the day. If the day is booked solid, it has a high probability of ending with frustration because you have no time to response to issues.

The same is true in beef production: Book 70 percent of the ranch with core programs, core cattle, core pastures and forage, and focus the other 30 percent on meeting the issues of the year. Good years: more cattle, more forage, more labor; bad years: fewer cattle, less forage, less labor.

Adaptability is critical and assures long-term sustainability. This principle is certainly obvious in the world of available cattle feed. The biggest mistake producers can make is to delay marketing decisions when feed runs short because that assures less flexibility.

Whether a wet or dry year, producers are challenged to be proactive and plan ahead. Now is the right time to plan for cow penning, when most cattle are handled at, during or following calving.

For many producers, calving pens have given way to May's cool-season grass pastures that tolerate a heavier stocking rate. Shortly, cow-calf pairs will be processed and sorted in preparation for summer pasture turnout. Producers know cow-calf

pairs need to be paired, mother and calf, no exceptions. That is not an easy job.

June is the time when range management programs developed for the ranch are initiated. Cows are moved to their respective summer grazing pastures, a place they'll be, we hope, until fall weaning.

However, summer weather sometimes may not match expectations and cattle need to be shuffled early. So let's focus on developing 70 percent core and 30 percent adaptable cow penning.

The simplest approach is what I call a "lazy L," a proactive management plan that evaluates cow-calf numbers and determines in advance how many pairs should be turned out to core pasture grass. This management style also plans ahead for easier adjustment to inventory should adjustments be needed.

The information in the Cow Herd Appraisal and Performance Software (CHAPS) program calving book (or any calving book) allows us to apply the "lazy L" calving distribution table by taking some time and analyzing the numbers.

But first, let's build a calving distribution table from the calving information. Take a sheet of paper and make five columns listing dates when cows calved across the top: first 21 days, second 21 days, third 21 days, fourth 21 days and late. Then add rows for each age of cow you have in the herd. Now you

have a table with all your cow ages down the left-hand side and calving cycle across the top.

Complete the table by going to your calving book and marking down each cow in the appropriate box in the table. For example, cow H8220 is a 4-year-old that calved 30 days into the calving season. Place a mark in the 3-year-old row and second 21 days column. Cow G7108 is a 5-year-old that calved 15 days into the calving season and would get marked in the 4-year-old row and first 21 days column. When finished, you will have a table that shows the distribution of your current calving season by cow age.

Determine how many "liquid cows" you need to market by drawing a "lazy L" and put everything below and to the right of the "lazy L" into the "could be sold" pasture. This identifies older cows and cows not calving on time. Adjust the "lazy L" according to need. If the goal is to have 20 percent of the herd as "liquid cows," then move the "lazy L" up or down until the number of old and or late-calving cows approximates the number of needed "liquid cows."

Many of these cows will work just fine for someone else, and will clean up and fine-tune your own operation.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center drew a line between the 9- and 10-year-old cows and a line between the third 21 days and the fourth 21

days to create our “lazy L.” In a previous dry season, the center sold everything below and to the right of that “lazy L.” While one is at it, add the wild, poor-mothering or poor-milking cows as well.

Getting back to where we started, producers need to set up their day with 70 percent planned work and apply the same principle to the operation, with a 70 percent allocation of resources to core programs. By doing so, the day goes better and change is prepared for, more tolerable and less stressful.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



[PDF - Lazy L Calving Distribution](#)

[\(Sample Herd Numbers\)](#) 

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[EPS - Lazy L Calving Distribution](#)

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