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## BeefTalk: Just When Does One Let the Calves Go?



**Match individual managerial skills with the operation and market accordingly.**

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Hay is the staple for cow-calf producers.

How much hay an operation needs to feed versus how much hay an operation feeds are two different numbers. So assuming cattle consume most of their feed needs from forage, let's figure. A pencil, pad of paper and some notes go a long way in trying to get the answers one needs.

This is not a ration-balancing process, but a rough estimate of forage needs. While grain and other feedstuffs can be fed as a replacement for hay, the question today is to ponder forage needs. Begin by knowing the pounds of cattle to be fed.

In the first couple of weeks of November, the Dickinson Research Extension Center weaned 110 heifer calves at an average weight of 451 pounds for a total weight of 49,636 pounds, and 119 steer calves at an average weight of 487 pounds for a total of 57,919 pounds, or a total of 107,555 pounds. The cows were left to graze crop aftermath, winter grass and standing corn, and, I might add, considerable standing forage despite the dry year.

The center goal is to develop these May/June-born calves as grass calves for turnout in May 2018 to cool-season forage. A gain per day of 1.5 pounds is adequate. Past years' gains have been closer to 1.3 pounds, but the calves are growing.

The underlying thought is that the calves will compensate for the lower winter gains when turned out to spring grass, gaining 2-plus

Images



Which option should I pick?

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Match individual managerial skills with the operation and market accordingly. [FULL STORY](#)

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pounds per day on spring and summer forage. The yearlings would be sold at 1,150 pounds or better, depending on summer forage quality and availability.

A lot goes into when to calve and when to wean. The center tries to keep the calves on the cows as long as possible, which is easier said than done. The weaning window means work and is a balancing act among weather, labor and lining up resources to meet the expectations of the cattle operation.

Calves can be kept on the cows, but a switch in weather can change positives to negatives rather quickly. The help likes to work in good weather. Frost-free water and adequate waterlines are taken for granted until the temperatures dip and some unexpected problem occurs.

Equipment and cattle close to home are good. Traveling miles to keep on top of cow-calf pairs in marginal weather is not so good. Producers need to wean when the unit can handle the calves and not push too hard to minimize inputs when cows and calves still are running together. The perfect answer always seems to come up short when the perfect storm arrives.

Let's round the total calf weight to 110,000 pounds, or 55 tons. I like easy numbers. Desired daily gain on the calves is about 1.5 pounds, so every month, the calves' gain should be around 10,000 pounds, or 5 tons.

Green grass will be here in May, so about six months of growth should add a total of 30 tons-plus of beef. So December should start at 60 tons, January at 65 tons, February at 70 tons, March at 75 tons and April at 80 tons, with 85 tons of beef ready for grass in May. The average total winter weight of the calves would be 140,000 pounds, or 70 tons.

As we figure, we need to use the average to calculate total feed needs. How much hay is needed? First off, we need to settle on an estimated daily feed intake. I would anticipate feed intake to run from 2.5 to 3 percent of body weight. To be on the safe side in regard to total feed available, an estimated daily feed intake at 3 percent of body weight would be 4,200 pounds.

In 180 days, the calves should require about 756,000 pounds of feed, or 378 tons. At 1,300

pounds per bale, the center would estimate 582 bales to carry the calves to grass. So that was the number I was searching for: how much hay was needed. The center can find the 582 bales, keeping in mind the cows need to be fed as well.

Next is a visit with the local nutritionist to balance the ration. An anticipated 1.5 pounds of gain will require some supplementation in addition to the forage. For the center, we feed a commercial supplement for 21 days: 3 pounds in the morning and 3 pounds at night to control coccidiosis. After the initial 21 days, the calves receive 4 pounds daily of a commercial supplement. Your local nutritionist will help match your supplementation needs to your forage.

And even before that, the question of when to sell the calves quickly becomes the pressing question. Currently, the center's primary source of income is grazing the cattle the second summer as yearlings. Selling the calves early leaves options of grazing forage on the table.

The calves could be marketed now at 550-plus pounds, as yearlings at 750 pounds at the end of April or as long yearlings at 1,150 pounds in the fall, or be moved to the feedlot in November and finished at 1,500 pounds in early winter. All the options are on the table, and the market projections would be more figuring for the night. The bottom line: Match individual managerial skills with the operation and market accordingly.

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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