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BeefTalk: Grass Calving

Opportunities make the grass-born calf a very real option.

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NDSU Extension Service

Reflection is a good thing.

Reflection helps put our decisions in perspective relative to our lives, our work, our community and our world.

This spring's weather has caused many to reflect on when to calve. The many forays of winter into spring this year have moved the sincerity of the question into real time. Granted, no singular event has whopped the cattle industry this spring; the day in and day out weather has taken a toll.

Dryness was reflected all winter, but now moisture and cold have chosen an extended visit. Thus, a real response regarding calving time is on the table for some. But most of the questions tend to be about time; in other words, March versus May or whatever months are being talked about.

The real issue is not time, but pen calving versus grass calving. Let me repeat: grass calving. The question begins with the concept of delaying bull turnout that traditionally occurs from the end of May to early June perhaps a week or two, or even a month to early July.

The expected answer is assumed to come in increments of time, but the question is framed incorrectly. Simply moving the time bulls are turned out and changing the associated calving time does not really get calves out of the pen.

In fact, delaying the time for bull turnout actually may make matters more challenging if cattle are still in the winter lots because hard, frozen lots may turn to mud and slush.

Time out! Switching to a later calving date is not about keeping the complexity of a previous management concept but rather, the shedding of the challenges of trying to purchase weather. And weather is expensive. Every region of the country has periods of time when weather is a challenge.

The way to free ourselves of the complexities of weather is to stop thinking about time and start thinking about the grass cycle: when the cool-season grasses start their annual regrowth. In other words, we're engaging Mother Nature, not fighting Mother Nature.

The symbol for this change is simply opening a gate to grass that is ready for livestock to graze. This natural cycle has been engrained in cattle

Images



**Which Cattle
Producer Are
You?**

long before cattle were domesticated.

Yes, I already can feel the raised eyebrows and cocked hats, but the truth never really goes away. To the grass producer, cattle are added to gain weight and stimulate plant growth. Historically, the cattle producer added cattle to grass to continue or improve calf gain.

These are two different philosophies. The grass producer wants to avoid the trappings of calving in a pen and the associated costs and labor. The historic cattle producer wants to accelerate growth by adding the trappings of calving in a pen to give the calf a head start prior to grass turnout.

The right answer is an individual producer decision. Time is not the point of discussion, but rather when to open the pasture gate. Individual balancing of inputs and outputs eventually will determine the true answer.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center opens the pasture gate when the cool-season crested wheatgrass enters the third leaf stage, about late April. Other parts of the country will differ on grass type and leaf stage, but all parts of the country have a proper time for the commencement of grazing.

At the center, the official start of calving is May 7, which means the targeted bull turnout date is Aug. 1. The average calving date for the center is May 25. The point is not May calving; the real point is that the cows are placed on pasture at the end of April or very early May to calve on grass.

Historically, the first calf born last year arrived on April 30. The year before that, April 30 again, and the year before that, April 29. Four years ago, the first calf born arrived on April 27. Occasionally, cows will calve prior to the opening of the gate, but the trappings of winter calving have all but deteriorated at the center. The cattle basically calve on grass.

In closing, the point is not simple, nor do I want to imply that. Calves born on grass have marketing challenges. Producers need to revisit marketing plans. The center has made those adjustments, backgrounding all the calves on into winter with the anticipation of developing spring, summer or fall marketing options.

The final marketing options are still unknown. Opportunities continue to emerge that make the grass-born calf a very real option. So when the appropriate leaf stage is waving in the spring breeze and the pasture gate is ready to open, ask yourself, “Could I calve on grass?” or “Should I calve on grass?”

Remember, the grass producer wants to avoid the trappings of calving in a pen and all the associated costs and labor. The historic cattle producer wants to accelerate growth by adding the trappings of calving in a pen to give the calf a head start for summer grazing. Which is right? I am not sure, but keep pondering.

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.

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Attachments



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