

## June Is Time to Shift Into Neutral Before the Next Crunch Time

By Kris Ringwall  
Extension Beef Specialist  
NDSU Extension Service



There is always a brief pause for northern cattle producers in early summer.

Not many of us drive straight sticks any more – at least not the kind of straight stick that really sounded like a straight stick. I was acquainted with one old grain truck that fit that description very well.

You tried to push the clutch in while hanging on to the steering wheel and bracing against the seat with steel coil springs sticking through gunny sacks. Then you slowly remove one arm from the steering wheel to grab the gear shift knob and pull it downward, only to arrive in neutral – that space between a powerful engine and a set of wheels going nowhere.

From there, I could never get the sequence perfect. I would commence grinding the gears until the wheels slowed up enough to give the transmission the opportunity to select another gear. Often upon letting up on the clutch, I'd be thrown towards the windshield, realizing the gear I'd selected was not the intended gear at all. Meanwhile, the engine and transmission immediately engaged in the sound of war, a battle between an engine going one speed and four tires going another.

As a cattle producer, right now I am in neutral. The last pleasant memory was a group of very pregnant cows waiting to calf. Since then, it's been a daily grind, lugging through calving, bawling calves, tagging calves, long nights, vaccinating calves and cows, synchronizing cows and heifers, breeding cows, fertility testing bulls and trying to keep enough feed into lactating cows to keep them in the fence. Life has been busy. Finally, the day arrives when all the cows and calves clamber into stock trailers for the joyous ride to pasture.

Upon opening the trailer gate, the old cows step out as if they had never left the pasture and the dumbfounded calves witness life at its best. At home, the lots are empty, the winter pastures quiet, the stretching on fence non-existent, and the tractor is not even idling. The remains of calving can still be seen in the distant

corners of the barn: a half-used electrolyte bottle on the shelf, a bolus gun not put away, a used tub of vaccination syringes ready for the garbage and a stack of vaccination cartons needing the serial numbers written down. Even the dog knows it is time to relax..

The Forth of July and other family gatherings will be here before we know it, but clean-up for today can wait. The dog can keep lazing for a few more days while summer rains encourage grass growth. A quick glance at the sagging hay piles makes a quick registry of hay needs. But for now, I will stay in neutral, the cows are out of sight and out of ear shot.

Perhaps these are the moments that keep people in the cow business. The tough times are really tough, but those neutral periods reward the senses with all those intangible feelings that make life what it is. And for all those who have never driven a real straight stick, you will need to define your own neutral.

I guess even in the cow business, generation X and generation Y exist, as will generation Z. Some of us ponder the need for a sale barn, or why we need to brand a calf. Some would suggest clones and no bulls. But the wise cattle producers of every generation take hold of these neutral times, think more than once on which path to take, seek good advice and then pull hard on the gear shift. Once engaged, the engine communicates decisively to the wheels and the rubber hits the road again.

I can already hear the gears meshing: hay production and pre-weaning vaccinations are just ahead. The phone's ringing. There's a calf out, got to run.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are

**Between  
Gears**



**Enjoy the Neutral Time**