

BeefTalk 505: Early Calving Cows Are Keepers

Cows need to calve early within the operations designated calving season and every 365 days.

As the cattle head to the cool-season grass pastures, spring breeding plans are well under way. While most of the cows have calved, spring grass means breeding time is not far away.

The other day was sunny and all the cattle felt good. Walking around the ranch, the bulls were pretty feisty and the heifers were kicking up their heels.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the first draft of heifers received their initial synchronization protocols for timed breeding on May 12. These heifers, gaining 3.4 pounds a day, are ready for grass.

The heifers struggled during the winter to keep up, but as spring arrived, they certainly have picked up and are flushing well. A second set of heifers will be timed bred on May 26 and taken directly to grass.

If cattle handling facilities are available, there are several synchronization regimes that make the use of artificial insemination (AI) workable. The time and effort do come with some cost, but adding the tremendous beef genetics stored in semen tanks across the country certainly is an opportunity.

One does not need to do the whole herd, but a selected set of cows may be a good baseline. Compare the artificially bred sired calves with your own to see for yourself what the results are. Select the early calving cows for AI breeding.

Several sets of cows have gone to cool-season grass. In fact, almost all the cows that are keepers at the center are on grass. Later-calving cows will sell at a pair sale in mid-May. This leaves cows that can maintain an early calving date within the herd's expected calving season, which means pounds and dollars.

Interestingly, after reviewing some of the typical values for cows enrolled in the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Associations CHAPS program, approximately 64 percent of the cows are calving within the first 21 days of the calving season. This percentage is calculated based on the third mature cow that calves, and that date defines the starting point when determining the calving intervals within the CHAPS program.

If we go back into the early part of the decade, approximately 60 percent of the cows were calving within the first 21 days. In the early and late 1990s, the approximate percentage of cows calving within the first 21 days of the calving season was 58 and 57 percent, respectively.

The data suggests these herds have improved first-cycle conception during the last couple of decades. This is a good thing.

In reviewing the center's calving records for cows involved with range research, 67 percent of this set of cows calved within the first 21 days of the calving season. Even better, 91 percent of the replacement heifers added to the herd calved before or during the first 21 days of the mature cow calving season.

The key to good reproduction is not to let cows fall back. In other words, one wants the cow to calve every year on time, with an average calving interval of 365 days. It would appear that CHAPS producers are getting the job done.

If you assume gestation is 283 days, the producers understand there only are 82 days remaining to have the cow rebred and conceive a calf for next year. By the time calving is slowing up, probably less than 40 days remain until the bull turnout date or the artificial insemination technician needs to be chute-side.

The bottom line is cows need to calve early within the operations designated calving season and every 365 days. If not, sell the pair.

For every day a calf is late, a producer loses 2.5-plus pounds per day that cannot be made up. Once sold, refocus on heifers and bring early calving heifers into the program to replace late-calving cows.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

Calving History

Historical trends of CHAPS cows calving within the first 21 days of the calving season.

Year	Percentage
1990-94	58.29%
1995-99	57.45%
2000-04	59.84%
2005-08	63.99%