

BeefTalk: Does the Early Bird Get the Worm?

Calving Season Impacts				
North Dakota CHAPS Producers				
Trait	Early March	Early April	Late April	
Average Daily Gain	neutral	neutral	neutral	
Calf Weaning Weight	neutral	neutral	negative	
Overall Calf Reproduction	neutral	neutral	neutral	
Length of Calving Season	negative	neutral	neutral	
Impact on Cow Calfing	neutral	neutral	neutral	

J.C. Cramer, NDSU, Frazee, and B. Berglund
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Calving Season Impacts for North Dakota CHAPS Producers

Should we go to May and June calving?

When should the calving season begin? In simple terms, the question could be: "Does the early bird get the worm?"

Following a bird hatch, remnants of abandoned nests can be found. There may be indications that not all of the birds survived the incubation or early upbringing.

Although there is more than one type of cowbird, the general image of a cowbird is one of a parasite. The cowbird lays its eggs in the nests of other birds and gambles that the chicks will outgrow the selected foster family by consuming the bulk of the food delivered by the foster parents.

If times are good, the aggressive, competitive cowbird chicks will grow rapidly. Without food, growth does not occur and death is imminent. The early bird, or at least the most competitive bird, gets the worm and wins.

The same is true for cattle. In the plains around North Dakota, a management pattern has evolved to meet peak lactation requirements. In the first 30 to 45 days after calving, the high-protein cool-season grasses are suited for cows with calves.

The pastures slowly decrease in protein production, depending on the grazing systems. The decrease coincides with the gradual decline in the protein requirements of the cow and calf.

That makes a lot of natural sense and is the reason for March and April calving in the northern Plains. In this case, the early calf gets the grass. However, that means calves are born earlier than some producers would like.

Survival (for the calf and producer) is at stake, which leads us deeper into the discussion of when to calf. Calves born while spring weather is not conducive to survival may freeze or have to be mothered carefully by both the producer and cow, which means more expenses and labor. Labor is not as readily available as it once was.

Our thoughts and the driving forces for survival in the cattle we raise need to be synchronized. Remember, before cattle were domesticated, they were like the birds. There was no help, so a pattern of matching the environment to reproduction and survival was established. The fittest survived by matching reproductive and growth needs to available resources.

Even after cattle were domesticated, herdsman, or as we say today, producers, historically have continued to provide assurance that those needs are met. The problem is increased costs and labor as producers gradually move away from the intrinsic pattern of how cattle deal with nature.

"Should we go to May and June calving?" That is the question producers are asking themselves. It is a tough question.

A review of data from the CHAPS program through the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association shows there is not much difference in early March- or early April-born calves and late April-born calving herds.

Calf average daily gain was very similar, no matter when the calves were born. Late April-born calves were lighter due to age and having fewer days to grow before weaning. Overall, reproductive performance also was similar for all calving seasons. From the data available in the CHAPS program, the bottom line is that the only disadvantage for early March calving herds was a slightly longer calving season. The disadvantage for late April calving herds was decreased calf weight at weaning due to the calves being younger.

It would appear the calving season, within the current norm in North Dakota, is matched reasonably well with producer expectations. The labor issue is real, which leads to thoughts of May calving. The calves are going to be lighter. Will the average daily gain actually decrease? We're not sure.

Alternative marketing plans will need to be thought through to offset calf weight. Should we consider June calving? Maybe one should try May first because there will be a significant change in the nutritional status of the pastures.

The real answer needs to focus on input costs and labor. However, remember that the early bird gets the worm.

May you find all your ear tags.