BeefTalk: Nice Weather for Calving is Priority One

Calf Death Loss - Typical: 3.9%

Every nice spring brings the comment: “Wish I could calve all my cows now.” Of course, those springs that bring cold weather and extensive snow and slush bring more negative comments about early calving.

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April 2, 3, 4 and 5 were the big calving dates during the mid-1990s calving seasons and remained that way well past the turn of the century.

Currently, the numbers look more like April 5, 6, 7 and 8. These are calving dates for North Dakota and may be similar for other northern Plains states. Other regions would need to determine the dates for themselves.

Mid-March would be the typical start of the calving season. If one had to pick a date, March 15 would be good. This coming week, a drive through range country will show cows everywhere with newborn calves at their side.

In fact, one of the more pleasant images of the West is that of a cow resting with her newborn calf on a grassy hillside. The mother will be bonding with her calf and the calf bonding with the mother. The cow knows that soon the calf will be jumping and enjoying life among the other calves. However, only a slight bellow and mother and calf will be reunited, regardless of the herd commotion.

The calving date sets all ranch and farm activity and is critical to the operational activity of the cattle unit. There is the comment made that calving seems to be getting later. However, for the herds that participate in the North Dakota State University Extension Service’s North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (NDBCIA) program, the calving date still remains quite stable.

The calving dates are calculated by analyzing those herds that utilize the NDBCIA’s cow herd appraisal of performance software (CHAPS) program. Any change in a beef operation is generally minimal, and backing off bull turn-out for a later calving date does not appear to be happening.

Obviously, no one this year has complained about the calving weather. Every nice spring brings the comment: “Wish I could calve all my cows now.” Of course, those springs that bring cold weather and extensive snow and slush bring more negative comments about early calving. However, those thoughts disappear as the spring sun arrives and the bull gates are opened.

What drives the calving date? I'm not sure, but the workload is part of the equation. It's not just the workload, but also the expectation of positive outcomes from a day's hard work. In other words, tough calving weather is tolerated, provided live calves are present at the end of the day.

Going back through the years, ranchers have worked hard to bring home the calves. The current benchmark for calf death loss, based on the number of calves born, is 3.9 percent. If one looks at the individual year average calf loss for the last 20 years, the lowest yearly calf death loss was 3 percent and the greatest yearly calf death loss was 5.8 percent.

No one remembers the year that the lowest number of calves died, but they will remember the year that the greatest number of calves died, which was the spring of 1997. That year brought us bad weather, bad storms and just a bad, bad spring.

Actually, let's look at the annual calf death loss for the last 20 years. Starting in the spring of 1994, the calf death loss was 3.8 percent. The following years were 3.8 percent, 3.5 percent, 5.8 percent, 3.1 percent and 3.9 percent (in 1999).

At the turn of the century, the spring of 2000 had a calf death loss of 3 percent, followed by 4 percent, 3.5 percent, 3.3 percent, 3.2 percent, 3.3 percent, 3.4 percent, 3.1 percent, 3.5 percent, 4.5 percent and 3.7 percent (in 2010). The calf death loss was 4.2 percent in 2011, 3.2 percent in 2012 and 3.9 percent in 2013.

The 20-year average calf loss is 3.7 percent. That average has very little variation. Although the worst year was more than 2 percent greater in overall calf death loss, the calving date did not change.

Average calf death loss is a good indicator of the calving environment and available labor to accomplish a positive outcome. If the calf death loss starts to rise through the years, then the environment or labor needs to change.

Historically, calf death loss will spike but not remain at the greater level. In the past 20 years, at least for the CHAPS herds involved in the benchmark of calculating calf death loss, only three years have averaged above 4 percent and only one year (1997) averaged more than 5 percent.

The other 16 years were close to the average and remained at 3.1 to 3.9 percent. If one considers all the day-to-day struggles and challenges that face the beef producer, a 20-year average of 3.7 percent is pretty good.

Currently, the CHAPS benchmark is 3.9 percent, which is slightly above average and is reflective of the production years 2009 through 2013. The goal is very realistic. In fact, if one goes back to the benchmarks that included the years 1994 through 1998, the calf death loss benchmark was 4 percent.

Keep up the good work and, as always, maintain a good herd health program.

May you find all your ear tags.