

BeefTalk: May Calving is Productive



Calf Weight per Exposed Female

May calving is enjoyable, manageable and workable.

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I remember discussing calving with a beef producer during one of the less-than-desirable mid-April days.

You know the kind of day: 28 degrees, wind, rain, snow, mud and other combinations of weather. A stocking cap, another cap, wet gloves, heavy boots and other cold-weather clothing are common to the occasion.

I asked how the day was going, and the response was garbled. In contrast, May calving is enjoyable, manageable and workable.

With each passing year, at least for the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the shift to May calving is easier to affirm. The center continues to May calve, in contrast to the traditional early April calving for many northern Plains producers.

The center switched to May calving in 2012, and following late calving on grass in 2013, 2014 and 2015, the cows continue to rebreed very well.

Again this year, the bulls will be turned out on Aug. 1 at the center, with the expected start of the 2016 calving season set at May 10. The actual first full-term live calf was born on April 28 in 2013, April 27 in 2014 and April 29 in 2015. This is in contrast to mid-March for many northern Plains producers.

Do those six weeks make a difference? Granted, many producers are done calving by the time we start, and their calves have six weeks of growth. In other words, the calves have a 100-pound head start on fall weaning weights.

Is that a concern? Depending on how one measures the beef operation and what end point is used, those 100 pounds are significant. But the 100 pounds are not simply lost, and managerial tweaking can recapture those pounds easily.

But even without any major tweaking, at least for the center, those May-born calves are holding their own. Last year, the center's beef herd may have started 100 pounds light, but the calves actually had an adjusted 205-day weight of 681 pounds. That was almost 50 pounds heavier than

the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) system's typical 205-day weight of 632 pounds.

Some would say, "I don't sell adjusted weights!" and that is true. But the center's calves averaged 164 days of age at weaning, with an average actual weaning weight of 540 pounds at the end of November. That is compared with the CHAPS typical age at weaning of 191 days and an average actual weaning weight of 558 pounds with traditional weaning dates. Those May-born calves grow and are certainly a marketable product using traditional management systems.

What is even more interesting in reviewing last year's records is that the center's beef herd weaned 524 pounds of calf weight per exposed female. The CHAPS benchmark is 495 pounds of calf weight per exposed female.

As noted earlier, traditional cattle management certainly survives the test of time. Change is not easy, but as those around us change, new doors need to be opened, some doors need to be modified and perhaps even some doors need to be shut. Like the old barn that had 12 stanchions for cows, a couple of stalls for the horses and perhaps a grouping pen or two for younger stock, seldom would the barn fit current production practices.

Is there a particular point to May calving? The one point that comes up more and more is simply labor. That's not just the availability of labor, but the overall comfort of those who do the work. There comes a point in a producer's life at which doing battle with Mother Nature becomes old. Granted, many previous battles were won, but at what cost?

Perhaps the biggest challenge is, even if the battle is won for this year, next year simply will call for more re-enforcements. Producer choice is and always will be the bottom line.

Back to May calving: I am pleasantly amazed by how the cow productivity remains competitive with traditional systems. The cattle remain in good condition (5.5 condition score), and of the overwintered beef cows, 97 percent of last year's beef cows calved within the first 42 days of the calving season. The preliminary numbers for the beef cows this spring (2015) would suggest just a little less than 84 percent calved within the first 42 days of the calving season. The CHAPS benchmark value for cows calving within 42 days of the calving season is just a little more than 86 percent.

That's all right and indicative that the cows are breeding well in August. More specifically, this spring, 112 calves were born to 111 cows. As of June 24, two calves had died, and one cow did not calve.

Another concern that looms in the future is udder soundness. In contrast to calving in facilities where cows can be handled, pasture calving requires more attention to udder soundness. Nine of the cows were marked for poor udders. This is a discussion for another time, but May calving is a go.

May you find all your ear tags.