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BeefTalk: Why Would Calving Time in the Northern Plains Change?



Calving dates are more than calendar dates on the barn wall.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

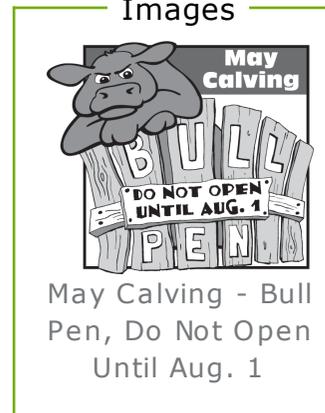
NDSU Extension Service

This is a good time of the year to share four years of data and experiences collected at the Dickinson Research Extension Center on May calving.

Why? The calving date is more than a calendar date on the wall of the barn. The date affects every aspect of a beef cattle operation and should be discussed with the utmost diligence.

Producers with several enterprises on the farm or ranch must fit all on the same calendar in the same

Images



May Calving - Bull Pen, Do Not Open Until Aug. 1

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barn. I would be the first to say, "Avoid a knee-jerk action that changes the calving date," but the discussion needs to be held.

So let's start. Well, the weather is nice in most areas, and the traditional calving time of March and April is fast approaching. The busiest dates will be late in the first week of April, with most cow-calf producers starting in mid-March. If I had to pick a historical start date, it would be March 15.

A review of the CHAPS (Cow Herd Appraisal Performance System) data set of North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association producers shows the actual 20-year (1994 to 2013) average calving date is April 4. The average date for fall calf weigh-up is Oct. 12. These dates have changed little, with no strong trend showing any significant change, indicating producer contentment with these traditional dates.

Producers calving outside of these dates are rare. In fact, historically, most have not even been interested in discussing the topic. So why even bring up the topic? We have three reasons to discuss it: first, weather effects on calf death loss; second, a decreasing labor pool with the proper cow-calf management skillset; and, third, the growing expenses associated with cattle production.

The three reasons are not in order of importance. Changing the calving date is the most important

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decision a cattle producer ever will make and should not be made under duress or out of frustration.

Historically, most beef producers have been focused on the weather, which generally involves a bad day or two every year. The problem is that every calving season will have a day or two of bad weather. The center has calved in almost every month of the year through time and has encountered weather challenges every calving season.

So why the discussion? Simple: escalating costs. The traditional approach may be the most comfortable, but if production costs exceed revenue, then the year's effort is of no avail. Crop producers have the same concern; however, crop producers can change crops in an effort to produce a crop with a value greater than the expense.

Although that is not always easy, the crop producers certainly explore several options each growing season. Beef producers generally have no options to switch species, so change within the beef enterprise is the main option.

Previously, I have noted projected production costs of more than \$650 per calf, which is above the speculated gross margin of \$600, thus the negative dollars. And beef production in pounds of beef sold seems fairly stable, which is another not-so-good thing.

These are not good feelings, especially if nothing changes, but the challenge is doable. So the time is now to think hard, to bring in the nonconventional thoughts and develop a plan.

Two things come to mind. First, if costs go up, pounds need to go up, too, which means keeping the calves longer to add pounds without reinvesting more dollars. Second, overall costs of the operation need to be pushed down. This does not mean painting the gate a different color, but changing the gate - in other words, significant change.

The center was in that very situation and made a change. For years, the center had a targeted calving start date of March 15 and a bull turn-out date around June 1. The average calving date was March 29. After a diligent discussion, the gates were changed; the bullpen gate was locked shut until Aug. 1.

The temptation to get a bolt cutter, open that gate and let those bulls out was real. But we resisted.

The first change that occurred at the center once bull turn-out was delayed from June 1 to Aug. 1 was the date that the cows start the third trimester of pregnancy. As cows advance in terms of days pregnant, a significant change in nutritional requirements occurs. When the cows are exposed June 1, the third-trimester day is Dec. 12, while for the cows exposed Aug. 1, the third-

trimester day is Feb. 12.

Delayed calving allows producers to take a more aggressive approach to late-season utilization of cover crops, crop residue and other forage sources, resulting in a one-third to two-thirds reduction in winter feed costs. Got your attention? More next week.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at (701) 456-1103 or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



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[Open Until Aug. 1](#)

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