

Cow Breeding Is Our Focus Now

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



For most cow-calf beef operations, calving is well under way and perhaps finished or winding down for the early calving operations. The bull buying season is past prime and the focus is on bull turn-out date. Next year's calf crop is in the works.

It may sound like I'm rushing the production cycle, especially when some of this year's calves are not yet born, but a look at the calendar brings home the reality of the cow-calf business.

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

If a producer is going to synchronize estrus, cow synchronization programs may require up to two weeks for implementation. In general terms, the more cows cycling prior to breeding, the better the chance of greater first cycle conception. A thoughtful glance over the cow herd will give a general idea as to expected reproductive rates for the upcoming season.

A review of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Integrated Resource Management (IRM) pocket reference indicates cows need to be in moderate condition to maintain an average calving interval of less than 365 days—a calf every year, on time. Moderate conditioned cows, commonly ranked with a body condition score of five or six, have an overall good appearance, with fat evident on the ribs, around the tail head and over the backbone.

Economics would dictate not to overfeed, resulting in fat cows, but just as important, underfed, ribby cows aren't what you want. In more detail, approximately 62 percent of ribby or cows with a body condition score of four are actually cycling 80 days after calving while 88 percent to 98 percent of cows with body condition scores of five or better are cycling within that time.

Hopefully, your cows are properly conditioned and ready to breed. However, if a general appraisal of your herd shows more rough hide and ribs, it's time to call your nutritionist and look at getting some energy into those cows.

Data from the last decade shows the percentage of cows calving the first 21 days of calving has not changed much. Records from the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) program indicate 57.6 percent, 57.1 percent and 57.0

percent of the cows in 1990, 1991 and 1992, respectively, calved during the first 21 days of the calving season. From 1993 to 1995, 59.2 percent, 60.4 percent and 58.3 percent of the cows calved within 21 days — a slight improvement over the early 90s. This improvement was lost from 1996 to 1998 when 57.6 percent, 57.2 percent and 56.0 percent of the cows calved within the first 21 days. Ending the decade, 58.9 percent and 59.2 percent of the cows calved in the first 21 days in 1999 and 2000 respectively – slight improvement.

The overall average for CHAPS herds from 1990 to 2000 was 58 percent of the cows calving within the first 21 days of the calving season. If you search and read, finding the actual conception rate of a cycling cow is not easy. Even if a cow is cycling, conception is far from guaranteed. Early data summaries indicate approximately a 65 percent conception rate on first breeding exposure. If, as stated earlier, approximately 88 percent of cows with a condition score of five are cycling when the bulls go out, only 57 percent of the cow herd would be expected to conceive in the first 21 days of the breeding season. CHAPS herds are 1 percent above average, but at least they are on the positive side.

Apparently, despite much advice, cow herds seem to reproduce relatively consistently. In my years of experience, economics drive long term trends, not production.

Apparently, there is little to no economic advantage to pushing cows to condition scores of six or greater, to assure almost all the cows are cycling when the bull arrives. Economics would encourage keeping those ribs covered up with some fat and exposing the cows to a fertile bull or good AI technician. The cow is still teaching producers when it comes to reproduction.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0087.

Cows Conceiving Within the First 21 Days of the Breeding Season

NDSU Dickinson Research
Extension Center - CHAPS

Year	Percentage
1990	57.6
1991	57.1
1992	57.0
1993	59.2
1994	60.4
1995	58.3
1996	57.6
1997	57.2
1998	56.0
1999	58.9
2000	59.2
Average	58.0