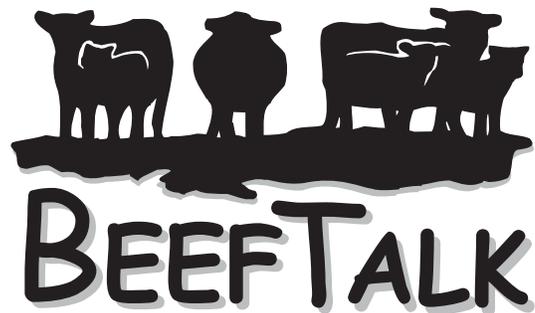


Calving and Weaning Dilemmas Closely Connected by Weather

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Is it easier to raise calves knowing spring is just around the corner or to wean calves knowing winter is just around the corner?

That dilemma, which faces beef producers annually, was especially evident this year in light of the cold March weather. Historically, most operators have a calving date that is memorized and sealed because almost every event on the operation is determined by when the bulls go out. At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, most of the cows are bred artificially, so the bulls are not literally turned out, but the effect is the same.

In recent years we have targeted March 1 as the start of calving, which means breeding (bull turnout) occurred on May 21. Heifers have been bred the week before the mature cows because only so many cows can be run through a facility on any one day.

Tied to this schedule was the subsequent working dates for the calves. We pull all the bulls following 42 to 45 days of bull exposure to provide a time to work calves before turnout to summer pasture. Calving season is tough work. Trying to schedule additional work days can be challenging given full feeding days and a few poor calving days due to tough weather. The long and short of it: We need all early calving cows to be calved by April 15. This provides two weeks to work the calves before the May 1 turnout to crested wheat grass pasture, which assures we don't have to work calves on pasture and provides calves a full potential to gain on the crested wheat grass.

North Dakota and the region produce bountiful cool season grass, which results in excellent calf gain. Traditionally, bulls at the Dickinson Research Extension Center were returned to the cows August 1, resulting in a May-June cleanup calving season. The cleanup cows are calved on crested wheat grass, not in the winter lots.

Backing up calving means turning the bulls out later. The March 1 calving date at the Dickinson Research Extension Center has produced large, well-grown calves, but calving really doesn't start March 1. With the unpredictable gestation length of cows, calving actually

starts in mid February. This year was no exception: the first calf was born on Feb. 12.

As cow-calf operations expand and skilled labor becomes increasingly scarce, the question of when to calve becomes a serious issue. The obvious solution to this problem would be to just calve later. However, there are often complicating factors that need to be considered.

In reviewing the CHAPS records, the average calf has been gaining 2.3 pounds per day. By delaying calving by two weeks, calves will average 32 pounds less if producers preselect a date to weigh and sell in the fall. Is it easier to raise calves knowing spring is just around the corner or wean calves when winter is just around the corner?

Most of what producers do in the Upper Midwest is weather dependent. Save a little here and you lose a little there. At the center, we are backing calving off 10 days. This year, the heifer breeding dates will stay the same, but the cows will start breeding on May 31. Calving should start March 11, with most of those cows calving early in March instead of February. The work dates for a May 1, 2003 turnout to crested wheat grass pasture will still require calves to be born by April 15, 2003 for optimum utilization.

Fewer calves in February will require more work in April and May. The Center will lose the clean break in calving between the regular and late calving cows. However, bulls will be pulled August 5 to eliminate late May or June calving. We will see how it goes, but remember, moving cows later is easy; moving them earlier is almost impossible. 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 BT0088.

Breeding and Weaning Activity Schedule

NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center

Year	Bull Turnout	Calving Date	Weaning Date	Weaning Weight
2001	May 21	March 1	November 8	605 lbs
2002	May 31	March 11	November 7	605 lbs (est.)
2003	May 30	March 10	November 6	582 lbs (est.)