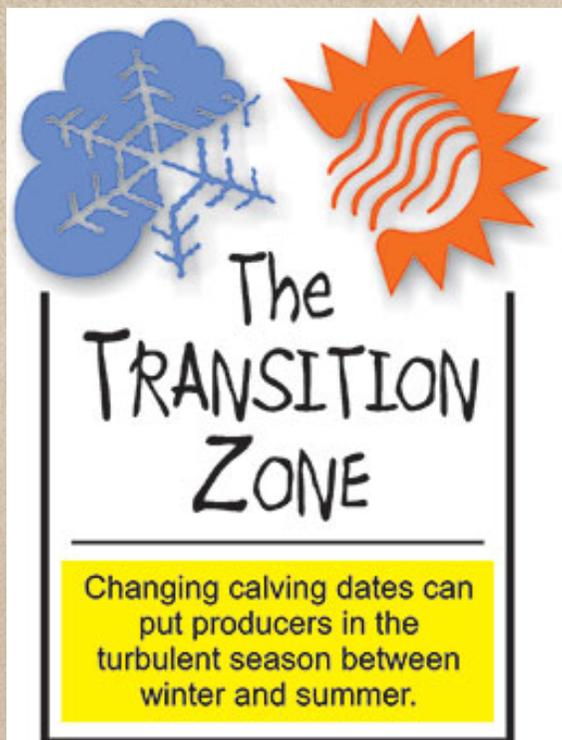




## BeefTalk 659: The Transition Zone Not a Good Calving Time

### SUPPORTING MATERIALS



*Moisture has come in the form of rain, sleet and snow. Even on good days, the weather has challenged producers, so the vigil must be constant.*

Calving season is winding down for many producers, but the last two weeks were tough. The problems were coming from many directions. In all aspects of life, there always is a transition zone. In the cattle business, one of the most obvious transitions is winter to spring. Spring is a good time, but the changing weather can be wonderful or disastrous or everything in between.

Historically, producers who have their cows calving in the spring have tried to avoid the transition from winter to summer. However, the vast majority of producers see their cows calve under the cover of late winter.

In reviewing data from North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association members who process their cow data through the NDSU Extension Service using the CHAPS program, the peak calving period is the last week of March through the first week of April. Many calves are born at that time and ready for cool-season grass around the first of May.

The rationale for this is simple. While the ground is frozen or at least semifrozen, a suitable environment can be maintained for cows to give birth. Along with the late-winter season, most

producers have invested in the needed equipment and facilities to ensure a successful calving season. The process has worked because producers have been able to work side by side with Mother Nature to have successful calving seasons.

However, the spring of 2013 is another stark reminder that sometimes the transition cannot be avoided. This year, the weather pattern has been wet. Moisture has come in the form of rain, sleet and snow. Even on good days, the weather has challenged producers, so the vigil must be constant.



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Keeping the herd dry and on dry land is not a simple process. The good news is that wet weather helps the grass grow and calves gain weight when eating grass. The downside is that dead calves don't gain any weight.

No matter where a producer lives, nature's cycle always will precede the copious forage production of summer with unpredictable weather. When challenged to define the vagaries of weather, spring will be discussed.

The appropriate calving time is at least a discussion point by producers in the cow-calf industry. There are producers who have invested in equipment and facilities to out maneuver Mother Nature. Meanwhile, some producers have opted to work with Mother Nature and have cows calving later. Both camps have to develop management and marketing plans to capture value from their calf crops to pay the bills and have some profit.

Producers must discern for themselves what works. However, the point of this discussion is about those producers who are trying to change in small increments. In other words, some producers are slowly backing their bull turnout to a later date. These producers often find themselves caught in the "transition zone," which is the worst of both worlds because they end up with higher input costs and lower output.

Changing calving dates is one of the most critical decisions a cow-calf producer will make because everything revolves around calving. The Dickinson Research Extension Center used to have calving dates starting the third week of March. Last year, the center moved its calving date to the third week in May. This year, the start of the calving season is the second week of May.

Like many within the industry, the procrastination was heavy because the center is designed and equipped to start the calving season in March or even earlier. The facilities and equipment are available and certainly work.

Available labor is the issue for many cow-calf operations. As times have changed, there are fewer people around who have a strong desire to work the calving pens. The skills and extra sense needed is not easily found in the workplace.

Like many producers, the center slowly started to question when to start the calving season. In the end, there was not much support to delay the calving season into April. Typical April weather was nice, but everyone in the room had several memories of what April can be like when Mother Nature decides to use April to transition from winter to spring.

Because of that scenario, May was selected. The second week in May was selected to help minimize any calving prior to the spring turn out of the cows. The center has a lot to learn about late calving. However, at least for these last few weeks, the crew has been busy getting ready for the calving season rather than pulling calves out of snow banks and wrestling with sloppy pens, moody cows and sick calves.

Those of us at the center still are learning, but we are making progress.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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