



BeefTalk 720: Calf Planting

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



Cows are on high alert after calving, so this planting behavior impacts how and when groups of cattle can be moved or at least easily moved.

May calving involves pastures, grass and space. Because feed is not delivered in a bunk, the cow decides where she wants to be in the pasture and sets in motion a series of thoughts that anchor that designated space.

As the cow lolls around this self-defined area, she eats as she wishes and gets a drink once in a while but always comes back to the same spot.

Eventually she calves and plants the calf. Planting seems to be something our agronomy friends speak of, but planting for the cow is very serious and certainly should be respected.

If in doubt, think twice before walking through the calving pasture. Following calving, the cow will expand her territory to keep eating, but she knows where her calf is. As you walk the pasture, watch the cows. You can tell immediately if you inadvertently cross the line between the cow and her calf. In fact, that can be a very dangerous thing to do.

In the cow's eye, you become a predator. If she is very protective, she may try to remove you. The point is that cows are on high alert after calving, so this planting behavior impacts how and when groups of cattle can be moved or at least easily moved.

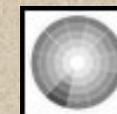
In our human ways, we assume we can do anything, so we simply do it. Perhaps when confining livestock, we may forget that it could overpower some natural instincts. These are the instincts meant for survival. Although the survival instincts were not needed while the cattle were confined, they are still there and become fully functional when needed.

Reflecting on nature, this process is very evident. How often does one actually see newborn deer, antelope or kittens? Rabbits can run all over the place, but you won't find the nest easily. The same is true about ducks, pheasants, grouse or the many upland game birds.

It also is difficult to find the nest of the pesky hen that keeps getting out of the chicken coop. One knows she has a



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nest, but where?

Our domestic livestock are no different. If given the opportunity, sows build elaborate nests for farrowing, and catching a mare foaling is a rare opportunity. These mothers are responding to their deeply embedded instincts to protect their young at all costs.

In my own upbringing, I can distinctly remember the day Dad decided to go get the lost baby pig. Dad allowed the sows to nest in the pasture. For some reason, one piglet was misplaced, so Dad decided he should go get it. Those who know sows realize that they take motherhood very seriously. Once Dad grabbed that lone pig, one squeal later, the race was on and a dozen or so sows had Dad in their sights. He made it to the fence, but those sows were serious because they were mothers, and mothers always mean business.

Back to the ranch, the center has struggled to figure out how to work and manage cattle during this planting phase. Yes, the calves eventually come and then start moving with the herd, but to move the herd prior to that is not easy. The cow knows where she wants to be, and so does the calf. Despite the huge odds, these calves will make every attempt to return to where momma said they should stay. The cows will move but always will want to go back to where they planted the calf.

Switch pastures and, the next day, the calves are back to the calving pasture and the cows are calling them with that distinctive bellow. It is confusing to the cows and calves and frustrating for those working the cattle.

With that in mind, things need to change. A better plan is needed for next year when the cows are moved to native grass the first part of June. To accomplish that goal, the center needs to do what is encouraged of every operation: Stop and reflect. How better could the cows and calves be moved? What would be less challenging? How, during these busy times, can the center improve the ranch process and flow?

Cattle work tends to be historically driven. If it worked last year, it will work this year. In fact, change often is omitted to keep the old ways. At least for now, the center has changed, so cattle management needs to change with it.

The point today is that, as many producers know, we need to learn to better understand a cow's complete package, which includes motherhood. From that perspective, sit back and review the operation to see how, with limited labor, one can be in sync with those often hidden but real behavioral traits of the cow.

Moving forward, a better approach is a producer working with cows rather than a producer versus cows.

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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