

Mount 'n Cattle

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Dallas Mount
University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service
Southeast Area Livestock Extension Educator
307-322-3667
dmount@uwyo.edu

Choosing a Calving Season

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As breeding season approaches, I thought it be a good time to discuss choosing a calving season.

Of all that neighbors discuss and all the things I spend time talking to colleagues and producers about, not much raises the hair on their necks like the topic of calving season. It shouldn't be that way, but the fact is that, when calving season is discussed, both parties seem to take sides and prepare their list of reasons why each calve when they do.

I challenge you to drop your guard, open your mind, and I'll try to present the discussion from a factual standpoint.

Determining a calving season is one of the most important decisions made in the management of your ranch. It impacts everything from labor demands to feed inputs. Weighing these individual factors – examining costs of production, evaluating the amount or risk you are willing to accept, and determining how you want to position your ranch for the future – will help make this decision.

Nutritional Considerations:

It is not news that green, actively growing grass contains the greatest concentration of protein and energy available from typical hay or rangeland. It is often overlooked just how substantial this difference can be. An animal grazing winter range may have a diet of 5 to 8 percent protein (maybe higher if grazing various browse and forbs) but that same animal grazing spring grass can have a diet greater than 20 percent protein – well above the necessary amount.

Protein is important, but one could easily argue that energy content is most important since that is often what determines costs in purchased feeds. Winter range typically has an energy (TDN) content of less than 50 percent, where spring grass can go as high as 73 percent TDN – a big difference!

Animal requirements rise steadily during the last third of pregnancy, peak 60 days after calving and slowly decline to weaning. Are the nutritional needs of the cow herd met when forage is short? Where does your calving season position the requirements of the cow with respect to what your ranch provides?

Don Adams, interim director of the University of Nebraska's West Central Research & Extension Center at North Platte, Neb., and Richard Clark, agricultural economics professor at the University of Nebraska, examined several production systems

and cost structures of several ranches and made the statement, “The system with the greatest feed costs (i.e. fed the most hay) had the lowest returns per calf at all scenarios.”

Structuring a calving season to reduce dependence on harvested and purchased feeds will more than likely increase profits. Exceptions always exist, but they are exceptions.

Calf/cow Health

Several studies have proven that calving cows on pastures or rangelands results in lower occurrences of calf disease and death. If a calving season is structured so more animals can calve away from the barn in open and clean environments, calves are less likely to become ill and die. Several studies show that calving ease is usually improved in range calving situations, which also results in fewer deaths.

The Economics of It

This is what it ultimately comes down to – a later calving season will likely wean smaller calves, so will a reduction in expenses offset this reduction in gross income?

I’ve worked several scenarios with producers when considering only the reduction in costs of feed and most are break-even; however, if calf death losses are reduced and labor expenses lowered along with winter feeding costs, most producers will put money in their pocket.

Perhaps a more convincing argument for later calving is that producers I’ve visited with who have moved calving back report they wouldn’t return to winter calving. In fact, many say they would quit ranching before returning to winter calving!

Preparing for the future

As I look at the challenges producers face, what comes to mind are the rising costs of energy, machinery, labor (cost and availability), market variations, etc. You can certainly develop your own list. The question, then, is how to structure an operation to be better prepared for these challenges?

My answer is to make the operation less subject to the multitude of risks facing producers, including less reliance on inputs such as fuel, machinery and labor.

By reducing dependency on harvested feeds, structuring an operation that requires minimal labor, and reducing marketing risk, I think producers can better position themselves to meet these challenges.

Choosing a calving season should be looked at from a management perspective as every other decision on a ranch. I believe the greatest considerations are weighing the impact on cost of production and how it positions a ranch to meet future challenges.

Don’t hand this decision over to tradition without considerable scrutiny. It is one of the most important decisions a ranch manager makes