

Choose the Right Calving Time For Your Customers

BY LISA HAWKINS MOSER

Calving season is the most exciting and stressful time of year for many Angus breeders. It can be especially worrisome for those experiencing calving death loss due to bad weather or lost market share by not having sale cattle available at the right time for their customers.

The cure may lie in a re-evaluation of your calving schedule. To start creating an alternative plan, producers may want to look at regional and national calving trends.

"Nationwide, 70 percent of producers calve in the spring from February through June and the remaining 30 percent calve in the fall from August through October," says Larry Corah, Extension beef specialist at Kansas State University. In the Great Plains, Corah has noticed a growing number of cattle producers are weaning their calves earlier than in past years. "Calves today typically nurse the cows 150 to 180 days rather than the traditional 200 to 250 days," says Corah. "This trend helps reduce costs because cow-calf producers are maximizing their use of forages and minimizing the need for supplemental feed."

Corah has also seen commercial cow-calf producers calving later in the spring because of the severe winter weather of recent years.

He does make an exception to the traditional calving schedule, however, when speaking about purebred producers. "Purebred operations may be out of 'sync' with the traditional calving schedule in order to meet their customers' demands," says Corah.

One Great Plains Angus breeder who illustrates Corah's point is Vance Uden of TC Ranch, Franklin, Neb. At TC Ranch, the 600 registered cows begin calving in early February and finish in early April. Uden says his calving season is determined by the commercial bull market.

"In this area, the best time to calve from a feed cost standpoint is early April," says Uden. From a total economic perspective,

however, Uden believes older calves sell better, thus generating enough income to overcome the feed expenses.

"Our February bulls will usually outsell our middle of March and younger bulls," says Uden.

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Because they are calving early in the season when bad weather can be a problem, Uden believes it's important to have good calving facilities. "We just built a new facility to give the calves some protection from the weather and when needed we will bring the cows in the barn to calve," he says.

Another concern for Uden is rebreeding. Because his cows calve in the early spring, Uden provides supplemental feed after calving to nutritionally prepare them for rebreeding.

"We have to use supplemental feed in April and May because the grass isn't ready to graze when we breed the cows," explains Uden.

To ensure the cows are getting the proper nutrients, Uden is continually testing the herd for nutrient deficiencies. After testing the cows, it was revealed that copper levels were low because this area of Nebraska has a

high level of molybdenum. Uden attributes his cow herd's high conception rate in 1996 to this adjustment in the nutritional plan.

Having one calving season works best for Uden from a management perspective because of all the ranch's other farming entities.

In the past, TC Ranch has calved in both spring and fall. Now Uden believes one calving season works best because he can breed, calve and wean the herd together throughout the year.

Just as TC Ranch's customer demand leads management to follow a spring calving season, Tehama Angus Ranch's commercial customers also dictate the calving schedule.

Set in California's Sacramento Valley near the town of Gerber, this ranch's bull customers have preferences for yearling and 18-month-old bulls; therefore, calves are born in both the spring and fall.

"Most of the bulls in the valley trade hands in late fall," says Bill Borrer, ranch owner. Because the ranch has developed a market for yearling bulls, two-thirds of the 325 registered cows calve in August or September.

For commercial producers who are reluctant to buy yearling bulls, Borrer calves the remaining one-third of the herd in February and March. Those bull calves are typically sold when they are 18 months old.

Feed resources at Tehama Angus Ranch are limited; therefore, Borrer provides hay and silage to the cattle from November through March. The rest of the year the cattle graze irrigated pastures.

When comparing the feed costs related to fall and spring calving Borrer says it costs him more to feed cows through the winter with calves on them. "But we only have to feed the bulls about 120 days after we wean them before our fall bull sale. So there isn't a feed cost incentive for either schedule," he says.

In respect to the weather, Borrer says fall

is a better time to calve. Weather is an important factor in Borrer's calving schedule as all the calves are born outside.

"We usually have good weather in the fall," says Borrer. "The winters are not too severe; however, it can get wet and stormy from November through January."

Unlike northern California, fall and winter weather are of little concern to Angus breeders Sam and Sharon Brown of Lena Farms, Lena, Miss. Manager Paul St. Blanc says summer is the most troublesome time of year in their region.

"It's hard to get spring calving cows to settle through artificial insemination because it's so hot during the breeding season," explains St. Blanc. He estimates the average temperature at Lena Farms from May through September is 88 degrees with 80 percent humidity.

Currently, Lena Farms 350 registered Angus cows calve outdoors from September through March with a break in December. However, St. Blanc is working to change that schedule and move all the herd to fall calving.

In addition to the breeding challenges, St. Blanc says Mississippi's summer's heat and humidity also have a negative impact on the spring calving cows' milk production. Fall calving cows, on the other hand, typically have good milk production and wean heavier calves.

In respect to merchandising, St. Blanc says it's difficult to sell yearling bulls in the South, so Lena Farms sells most bulls at 18 months of age. He attributes this challenge to the fertility troubles of other breeds of cattle used in his region.

Unlike in California and Nebraska cattle raised in Mississippi are able to graze year-round. Cattle are supplemented with cottonseed and corn in the winter.

"Although our winter grasses are good, they are a little low in energy," says St. Blanc. "Aside from the energy benefits, feeding the cows in the winter also helps us with heat detection since the cows eat from the troughs."

Although Uden, Borrer and St. Blanc follow different calving schedules, they each believe they've found a system that enables them to satisfy their customers' demands and thus remain profitable.

"Economically, the best time of year to calve is determined by your climate and market conditions," Borrer says.

