



Best Calving Time Is Site-Specific

Some people say summer calving is the way to go; however, the concept won't fit everyone. Choosing when to calve might be one of the most important economic decisions made in a cow-calf operation.

by **Troy Smith**

When calving out cows, Bob Price has tried it all, both early and late, in spring, summer and fall. Now don't get the wrong impression. We're definitely not poking fun at Price, or suggesting that his management style is fickle. He's a serious commercial cattleman, and he is seriously opposed to spending more money than he has to.

As a proponent of profitability, Price has been willing to explore different management systems for Gracie Creek Ranch, located northeast of Burwell, Neb. He has settled into what he calls a late-spring calving season, but it spills over into early summer. While the first-calf heifers and some early cows calve in late April, the majority of his Angus-based herd delivers in May and June.

"We've calved in the early spring, which required quite a bit of winter feed for cows. And we've calved in the fall, which still took a lot of feed. We just fed it at a different time," Price says. "But calving when we do now, we match the cow's nutritional requirements with forage quality and availability. I think we're a little more in synch with nature."

One of the benefits is comfort for man and beast. Price can check cows while wearing a straw hat instead of earflaps. No

special facilities or sheds are needed, because cows calve on the range, dropping their calves on clean, green grass.

"We put a lot of selection pressure on calving ease and udder quality, and by calving when nature is most friendly, the cows require less attention, less labor," Price adds. "After we wean, the cows get along on winter range with less supplemental feed. We want to let the cattle harvest the forage by grazing as much as possible. Every day we can avoid starting a tractor and hauling hay to cows saves feed, fuel and labor — and money."

Ideas for saving money, and particularly for cutting feed bills and associated expense, should interest cow-calf operators. Of the annual \$335 per cow cost of production that Cattle-Fax analysts claim the average U.S. producer bears, as much as two-thirds goes for harvested and purchased feed. But Nebraska research has shown that, compared to an early-spring calving season, a strategy similar to Price's may cut costs and improve profitability for Sandhills producers.

At the Gudmundsen Sandhills Laboratory, near Whitman, Extension beef specialist Don Adams and his University of Nebraska colleagues found that March-calving cows require nearly two tons of hay per head

annually, compared to 227 pounds (lb.) for June-calving cows. June calving more closely matched the cow's peak nutrient needs with the high nutrient content of immature growing forages and allowed for an extended grazing season.

"Essentially, the June calving system is a yearlong grazing system, as those cows grazed 357 days annually compared to 233 days for March-calving cows. Feeding and calving labor inputs were 61% lower for mature cows calving in June," Adams explains. "The cost to produce a weaned (June-born) calf was about \$80 less, and net returns were about \$70 more when compared to the March-calving system."

Weights for June-born calves, weaned in January, were 70 lb. lighter than for March-born calves weaned in September/October. However, the typically higher seasonal price in January and February means the light calves have about the same gross sale value as March-born calves sold in the fall. But, because production costs were less, net return was higher.

Not for everyone

Some beef industry pundits, consultants and members of the livestock press have waved the Nebraska results like a blanket

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recommendation for June calving, but Adams says no calendar date will fit all environments. In Montana or the Dakotas, weather definitely can pose a threat to late-winter or early-spring calves. But on those Northern ranges, early summer usually brings a decline in the nutrient value of the predominately cool-season forages. And summer calving may not suit a Southern environment either.

“Calves do so poorly in the oppressive heat and humidity, and the nutritional value of our forage declines in the summer. After June, it’s not much more than maintenance feed,” offers Bodey Langford, who runs both commercial and registered Angus cows near Lockhart, Texas.

Langford says the quality of his range is highest during early spring, but that country between Austin and San Antonio usually benefits from winter grass, too. Consequently, Langford chooses to calve commercial cows during January, February and March. However, the registered cows

calve during a 75-day period beginning in October.

“We calve the registered herd in the fall for marketing reasons. Those fall-born bull calves are about right to fit the bull tests and sale markets we want,” Langford explains. “But a fall-calving herd also fits our ability to produce some good quality forage from winter annuals. We pasture a lot of oats and rye in the winter.”

L.R. Sprott, Extension beef specialist at Texas A&M University, advises Southern producers to consider all environmental factors when choosing a calving season. He says heat and humidity probably head the list. Particularly in Southern and Southeastern states, their combined effect can be hard on newborns, but they also may be detrimental to fertility. Sprott says data from Louisiana and Texas suggest that pregnancy rates will be low for females in spring breeding seasons that progress beyond the month of May.

“Texas trials have demonstrated a

dramatic drop in pregnancy rates for females displaying estrus during June through September, compared with earlier months,” Sprott says. “And for Southern herds grazed on tall fescue, summer calving and breeding are usually undesirable because endophyte-infested fescue, combined with heat stress, results in summer toxicosis, [the symptoms of which] include reduced fertility and reduced growth in calves.”

In bulls, heat stress can reduce sperm quality and numbers. Even stress lasting no more than 12 hours may be detrimental to fertility, with a recovery time of six to eight weeks required for normal sperm production. Male libido and serving capacity also are lower during hot weather.

Sprott advises against summer calving in most Southern and Southeastern herds because of the potential for reduced calf performance. Many producers must market calves at or near the time of weaning and can’t retain ownership to take advantage of postweaning opportunities for compensatory gain.

“Producers who use public lands may have fewer choices of when to calve because rules in lease agreements dictate timing and duration of grazing, which may not coincide with a desirable calving period,” Sprott adds.

Don Adams says he agrees that some marketing plans do not lend themselves very well to matching the cow’s requirements with forage nutrients and extended grazing with minimal harvested feed. For example, a seedstock breeder might need to calve during late winter or early spring in order to have animals of marketable age during periods of demand. Club calf producers must raise animals whose birth dates match requirements for regional shows.

“Calving and breeding during periods of adequate, high-quality grazing can reduce the need for supplements and reduce annual feed costs, but production costs are only one side of the profit equation. Reproductive performance needs to be maintained and prices received for products sold are critical to profitability,” Adams states.

Producers should base their choice of calving season according to site-specific conditions that affect production and associated costs. There is no particular calving season that is best for everyone. However, the selection of a calving season that is best for your operation could be one of the most important decisions made on your farm or ranch.

Calving season considerations

Among the topics discussed during the 2001 Range Beef Cow Symposium, in Casper, Wyo., were considerations for selecting or changing a calving season. The following list was gleaned from discussions led by Burke Teichert, of Deseret Ranches, operating in Wyoming, Nebraska and Oklahoma; Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) President Connee Quinn, whose ranch straddles the Nebraska-South Dakota border; and Nebraska Sandhills rancher Bob Price.

Climatic and resource constraints. When is it too cold, too hot or too wet? Feed quantity and quality available before, during and after calving, along with availability of protection and stock water can eliminate some choices of calving periods, or result in additional expenses to compensate for undesirable conditions.

Competing enterprise constraints. Demands of other enterprises, such as crop production or other livestock, may conflict with certain choices of calving season. Don’t let a small enterprise rob potential profitability from a larger one.

Potential change in winter feed costs. Can you cut feed costs by reducing hay production and using some hay ground for extended grazing? Can you eliminate hay production (and the equipment) in favor of more grazing and purchased supplemental hay? Before deciding, you’ll have to know your own hay costs. You may be surprised.

Potential changes in non-feed costs. How are costs associated with labor, facilities, equipment and fuel affected by your choice of calving date?

Market weights, dates and prices. What are you going to sell? When? Will it be bawling calves, weaned calves, backgrounded calves or yearlings? Or will you own them all the way to the rail? Selecting a different calving season may result in the loss of old options, but new ones nearly always appear.

Range and pasture management. How will all of the above considerations affect your operation’s carrying capacity? Will you be able to manage for optimum forage production and optimum beef production? Summer calving in a rotational grazing system or on public land can present unique problems.

Bull management. Choosing calving and breeding seasons that are different from your neighbor across the fence may require attention to keeping your bulls at home — or keeping his bulls out of your breeding pasture.

People benefits and problems. Will the expected outcome of your choice match your lifestyle desires, values and profit objectives? Do your co-workers or family members agree? If your team isn’t behind the decision, you should think again.