

# REPRO TRACKS

by Cliff Lamb, Texas A&M University

## Consider a Calving Season Change

*Traditionally, producers in the United States focused on calving their herd during the spring. This tends to mean different things for people.*

For example, many relate spring calving to February, whereas other folks may think spring calving is in April. Regardless of an individual's definition of spring calving, the majority of producers have chosen this time of year to calve. Calving season is determined by weather, labor, management options, markets, or "because that is what my dad and granddad have always done and it worked for them." However, for many of those same reasons it may not be a bad idea to consider alternatives, such as calving during the fall.

### Consider the fall

The cattle market fluctuates throughout the year and from one year to the next. It will continue to change as new regulations and supply and demand alter our industry's future. Producers generally have control over their management system and, for the most part, an understanding of the cattle market. With this in mind, each producer may have different end points in mind. However, the first thing every seedstock operation needs to consider is when the best time of year to calve is for their area. This is something each producer has control over, and can modify.

The first advantage of fall calving

is that the cattle markets for weaned calves tends to be better in the spring than in the fall. Approximately 70 to 75% of all calves are born in the spring, so most of those calves are sold in the fall at weaning (September to November). Fall calving allows producers to potentially market their calves in the spring when the cattle cycle tends to be in favor of newly weaned fall calves. In addition, by calving in the fall and backgrounding on summer pasture, producers have the potential to sell heavier calves in the late summer or early fall.

For the most part, operations that calve in late August through October enjoy excellent reproductive performance from cows. The body condition scores (BCS) of cows after summer pastures should be excellent. These cattle return to heat more quickly than the thinner spring calving cows. The breeding season in late November and December is usually more moderate weather. This weather is also desirable for producers to utilize estrus synchronization and implement some form of fixed-time artificial insemination (AI) protocol. Calving much later than October tends to result in less desirable breeding conditions because of the potential for extremely harsh winter weather,

such as snowfall, blizzards and frozen terrain. This often deters the breeding capability of bulls and cows.

### Lower maintenance

The greatest benefit of fall calving is the relative ease of calving and low maintenance at that time. For those producers that do calve during the fall, they will agree that it tends to require less maintenance and cows need less assistance. This is a result of lighter birth weights and better conditioned cows for labor after grazing good quality forage throughout the summer. The lower incidence of calving difficulty or "dystocia" also aids in the return to estrus and partially aids in the pregnancy rates of fall-calving cows.

The relative differences in birth weight between calves born in the fall compared to those born in the spring are demonstrated in Figure 1. Presumably, cows that calve in the spring tend to consume greater quantities of forage and feed during the winter months, just for maintenance during the cooler period of the year (towards the end of gestation). Many of these nutrients are directed towards the growing fetus. Thus, the spring calves tend to have greater birth weights than their fall counterparts.

Cost of feeding the fall-calving cows does not necessarily need to be more expensive. The goal is to reduce expensive feed inputs after the breeding season is over. This strategy is usually sufficient for the fall-calving cow to go through winter without excessive feed inputs. These cows still have the opportunity to regain body condition during the summer months after the calf has been weaned.

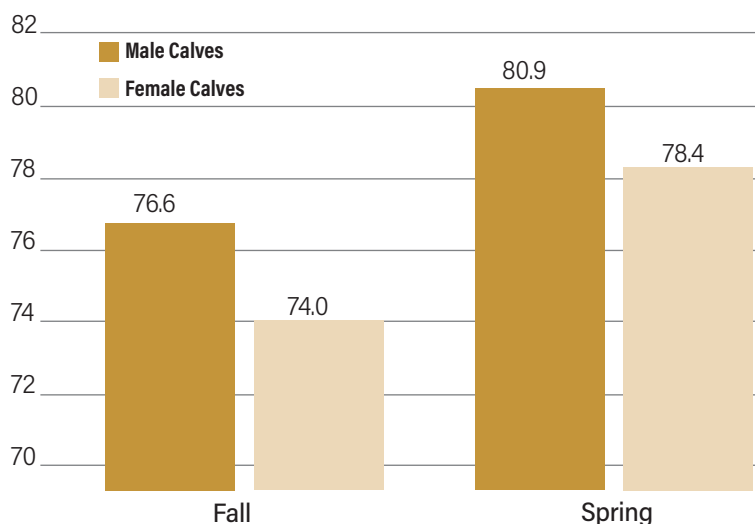
For a system like this to work, sufficient feed needs to be available during the fall and early winter to maintain condition on the cows. Each producer may have their own strategy for ensuring that there is sufficient feed available, such as stockpiling pastures, or providing good quality hay, or even feeding grain as a supplement. Certainly one consideration needs to be made for the lactating fall-calving cows through winter. However, there may be an alternative management strategy to handle fall calves, providing an opportunity for reducing nutritional requirements on the cow. One strategy may be to consider early-weaning fall calves.

## Final thoughts

No single system is suitable for every producer. Fall calving may be an option for you. Operations that consider two calving seasons may have a reduction of bull costs, because they will be utilized twice during a single year. However, additional labor and costs may be required for two calving seasons. Fall calving may be more desirable in terms of calving ease and market trends. But, before altering your calving season, be sure to consider your marketing strategy and management system. <sup>[A]</sup>

*Editor's note: Cliff Lamb is the animal science department head and a professor at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas.*

**Figure 1: Birth weights of male and female calves born in the fall compared to those born in the spring (Adapted from Gaertner et al., 1992).**





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