

DAY CALVING OR NIGHT— YOU MAY HAVE A CHOICE

by Ann Gooding

It's warm. The evenings are pleasant. Cold days and nights are a long way off. But they'll get here—and so will calving season.

Close attention to cows during calving season is essential if both problems and losses are to be kept to a minimum. And cattlemen know that constant day and night surveillance is not only tiring but in many cases requires hiring extra help.

Now it appears that 24-hour vigilance might not be necessary. At least that's what a recent study indicates. A few years ago Canadian cattlemen Gus Konefal discovered a relationship between calving and feeding times, and that relationship has now been substantiated in a controlled study conducted by the Manitoba Dept. of Agriculture and University of Manitoba livestock specialists.

In the study, which was set up for the 1979 calving season, 102 of Konefal's Hereford cows and heifers were separated randomly into two trial groups. Both groups were fed identical rations and lived in similar conditions except that after Feb. 1, about a month prior to calving, the experimental group was fed at 11 a.m. and again at 9 p.m. The control group was fed at more typical times—at 8 a.m. and again at 3 p.m. A member of the Dept. of Agriculture monitored Konefal's daily records, and data was computer-analyzed at the Manitoba Animal Science Dept.

The Results

The study has been completed, the evidence is in—feeding times do significantly affect calving times.

All 49 calves born to the experimental group (those cows fed at the later hours) were born between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m., with 75.5% of them born between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

The control group (those cows fed earlier in the day) produced 43 calves, 39.5% of which were born during the day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. The remaining 60.5% came at night. There was a definite peak calving time for this group, occurring between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., a 3-hour period during which one-fourth of this group's calves were born.

As a comparison, data on 1,151 calvings recorded during four years at the Agricultural Canada Research Station, Brandon, Man., revealed that 51.5% of the calves were born from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with 48.5% born between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. These cows were fed early in the day, the method most commonly used by cattlemen.

Confirmed Observations

This spring's study confirmed the results of Konefal's informal 1977 and 1978 tests. In 1977 he fed between 11 a.m. and noon and then again at dusk, and all but two of his 100 cows calved between 6:30 a.m. and 7 p.m. The following year, using similar feeding times, 93 out of 96 cows calved between those same hours. In those two years, 95.9% (188 out of 196) of the calves were born during the day.

Konefal theorizes that cows are less likely to calve during the night if they are kept busy eating. He feeds just enough hay

in the evening to keep the cows eating, not enough for them to fill up on and then lie down in.

Konefal also believes that there is some correlation between weaning times and calving times. He weans his calves early in the morning, taking them off the cows between 6 and 7 a.m. He has done this for several years, including last fall in preparation for this past spring's study.

Konefal stresses careful selection of cattle, with emphasis on performance and calving ease. And he says it simply makes good sense to be familiar with the cows and their breeding and calving records.

Less Chance of Problems

Konefal says of daytime calving, "You're bound to have some problems at calving time. But if you're there, there's less chance of something going wrong...and there's a better chance you'll be there during the day."

Both Konefal and Dr. Andrew Boston, provincial beef program specialist dealing with the Konefal system, would like to see other breeders try this technique, especially breeders from other areas who use different management methods.

Dave Nichols, an Iowa Angus breeder, has already tried the Konefal method, and he's sold on it. Nichols told the JOURNAL that, during the past winter, he fed 140 heifers every evening at dusk. Eighty-five percent of them calved between 5 a.m. and 9 p.m., with more than half of the 140 calving between 5 a.m. and 10 a.m. Nichols had not kept records on calving times in previous years, but he knows a number of cows calved during the night, certainly more than last spring's 15%. Nichols says he will be using the method again next year.

A Manitoba Dept. of Agriculture news release reiterated another breeder's experiences. "...Ken Waddell has used the Konefal system for two calving seasons. Of 70 calves born in 1978 and 1979, Waddell says only one was born between midnight and 5 a.m. His Shorthorn cattle are fed once daily, about 6 p.m.

Same With Sheep

"Waddell says he had similar results this winter with a small flock of sheep that are self-fed except for their grain ration, which is also given at 6 p.m. Over a period of 27 days, only six of 41 lambs were born between midnight and 6 a.m."

In the same news release, livestock specialists warn that it's too early to apply the Konefal method generally in livestock production. Dr. Boston says, "There's no doubt it happens in this (Konefal's) herd. However, it raises more questions than it answers."

So further investigation is necessary, but Konefal's findings, supported by this spring's study, have established that feeding times do alter calving times. And calving confined mostly to the daylight hours would be, at the very least, a convenience. More important, it could save both time and money. And it would mean fewer hours spent outside on cold winter nights. 