

Calving Season Simplified

From Washington to West Virginia,
we visit with Angus breeders to get their tips
on what makes for a less stressful calving season.

by *Kindra Gordon*



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

There's no doubt about it, calving season on any ranch is a harried, hectic process that can mean long days and nights of minimal sleep. While the weather is a big factor that no one can control — no matter what time of year you calve — there are a few management protocols that can help make calving go somewhat smoother.

Angus Journal polled several breeders across the country asking the question, “What do you do to help simplify calving on

your operation?” Here we share their responses as a means to offer ideas to other cow-calf operations. However, remember that what may work for a producer in one region may not work everywhere.

Start with selection

Collectively, the producers we visited with all emphasized that calving is made easier if you've put some genetic selection emphasis on calving ease and birth weight.

Coulee City, Wash., Angus breeder Bill McLean, whose herd begins to calve in early March, sums it up this way: “We're certainly aiming for calving ease, but not just using low-birth-weight sires to do it. It's a generations-of-cattle process accomplished by culling cows and bull selection.”

To that end, McLean, who manages about 200 Angus cows in the semi-arid region of Washington with his son Dean and grandson Lee, reports that 25 years ago they began the practice of culling any cow that had calving problems.

He says they continue to put emphasis on convenience traits such as udder and teat size, and a cow's ability to lie down and have a calf quickly. McLean says, “America's ranchers are too busy to babysit cows.”

As a longtime student of well-known animal scientist Jan Bonsma, McLean has also focused on the hip structure of the herd bulls he purchases. He explains, “I look for good width through the hips, and the pins placed a little lower than the hip bones. We believe this helps heifers calve without problems.”

McLean reports that he breeds heifers to low-birth-weight bulls, but those sires are not used on the mature cow herd.

As a result of these strategies, McLean says, today their calving difficulty is mainly confined to malpresentation of the calf.

Likewise, Mitch Rohr, of the Lazy H Ranch at Larkspur, Colo., believes a key to calving success begins with strict culling. The Lazy H primarily manages Angus donor females and calves about 25 mature cows and 15-20 first-calf heifers in January and February and another similar-sized group in September.

Rohr says they may have 40 replacement females to start with, but by breeding time, a couple will already have been culled. Whatever heifer is not bred by artificial insemination (AI) after the first cycle is also culled. “Sometimes you lose some good genetics, but we believe our culling criteria early on helps with maternal and fertility traits down the road,” Rohr says.

Sort into groups

Another commonality among many of these breeders is moving the cows and heifers closer to the home ranch and facilities prior to calving, primarily due to weather concerns, and sorting the herd into smaller groups to minimize disease outbreaks.

At Woodhill Farms Inc., Viroqua, Wis., Brian McCulloh says they calve about 250 head beginning in mid-February. He says they have very little calving difficulty, but their biggest challenge is the weather. He reports that their area gets an annual precipitation of 36 inches (in.), so moisture

► **Above:** Calving is made easier with genetic selection. Paying attention to calving ease and birth weight helps ensure that calves are born without assistance.

can be a challenge — especially when calving in March and April. “In this part of the country, the more we concentrate cattle, especially young calves at calving, the more problems we have with scours,” McCulloh says.

His solution is to split the herd into four groups of about 60 head each, and, he says, “If I had one more location, I’d even split them into five groups.” The groups are sorted based on due dates. Each calving area is about 10-12 acres, and forage is stockpiled there beginning in mid-July until calving starts in February.

McCulloh has found that the small groups help minimize disease problems.

He admits that with his system of separating the herd into four groups he has to have four sets of chutes and pens, and it creates some extra work. But with their limited pasture space, it works. If the weather is cold and wet, he can get newborn calves into some protected areas. “If it is 10 below and dry, the calves do fine, but if it’s 35 degrees and rainy, the calves have a tougher time,” McCulloh says.

McCulloh concedes that if he had open rangeland like producers in Nebraska and the Dakotas, where they can move cow-calf pairs to a new location after calving, he wouldn’t have to manage his herd the way he does, but he doesn’t have the luxury of that space.

“I recognize that the easiest way to avoid weather problems would be to calve in May. But that doesn’t fit with the age of bulls we want to produce for our customers,” he adds.

John and Terri McCoy of Brookwood Farms at Franklin, W.Va., keep their first-calf heifers separate from the rest of the herd so they can be kept closer to the barn and calving facilities if the weather is bad or one needs assistance. The McCoys have a herd of about 100 purebred Angus cows and calve in November and December.

In Washington, McLean separates his first-calf heifers from the mature cow herd, primarily to give the younger females an extra boost in nutrition and to minimize the socio-interaction that can occur when older cows are with younger females.

At Springfield Angus, Louisburg, N.C., farm manager Matthew Cox says that as soon as calves are born, they are moved with their mama to a different pasture. “We’ve found that fewer calves in the calving area seems to make it less confusing for heifers, and it makes it easier to check the herd. If we see a calf, we know it is a new one,” he says.

Cox believes moving pairs out shortly after calving also helps keep the calving area more sanitary and disease-free.

Tapping technology

Several of these breeders are also firm believers in using the available technology to make their calving season more manageable.

West Virginia’s Terri McCoy counts synchronization as an invaluable tool that makes their calving season easier. She reports that they synchronize and AI their cows so they can “get as many to calve in as short of a time period as possible.”

At Woodhill Farms, McCulloh uses synchronization to get 70% of his herd’s calves born in the

first 45 days. McCulloh even goes so far as staggering the synchronization of his herd over a four-week period to match the four groups he splits the herd into at calving. So in May, they’ll synchronize and AI heifers the first week. The second week they’ll synchronize 2-year-olds, etc.

Ultrasound is also a popular tool to pinpoint calving dates.

Chris Earl of Sunny Valley Farm LLC, Yorkville, Ill., says they ultrasound everything in order to have a good knowledge of when each animal will calve and what she’s having. He says this also allows them to sort the herd into some smaller groups. Sunny Valley Farm calves an 1,100-head spring herd from late January through March, and a 180-head fall

herd that calves from late August through Dec. 1.

Other tips


Following are some other calving strategies that these producers shared.

Nutrition. McLean emphasizes that proper nutrition and exercise among the cows prior to calving has a big influence on the health of the calves.

Rohr feeds alfalfa hay to his cows and heifers before and after calving for the vitamin A it provides to help boost reproduction. He also likes his calving pastures to have some slope so cows — especially his donor females — get some exercise and tone.

Earl says he has found it is important to introduce silage to the herd and get them accustomed to it before calving so it doesn’t change the concentration of the cow’s milk.

Disease management. McCulloh says once the weather is nice they don’t let calves use calf shelters because he’s learned those areas harbor bacteria. He has also avoided building a large, central calving barn, saying, “That’s capital-intensive in my mind, and it’s like a giant day-care center harboring pathogens.”

Earl says they vaccinate against scours and try to keep calves stress-free. 

Editor’s Note: *If you have a calving philosophy or management idea that you’d like to share for a future story in the Angus Journal, contact Kindra Gordon at office@gordonresources.com.*

“America’s ranchers are too busy to babysit cows.”

— Bill McLean

Favorable on fall

Gordon and Christine Stucky of Circle S Angus Ranch at Kingman, Kan., say one of the most productive changes they’ve made has been the move to calve a large segment of their cow herd and all of their first-calf heifers in the fall during September and October.

Gordon says, “It required several years of analyzing our available forages and the timing of grazing, but it has resulted in a tremendous labor savings during the calving season.”

He adds, “We traditionally calved most cows and heifers from January through March and fought the weather on many occasions. This resulted in more labor to manage the heifers, with confinement needed during most of the calving season and especially during severe weather,” he adds.

With their annual production sale also in March, Gordon says their labor was already stretched in January and February with sale preparations.

For their fall calving program, the Stuckys use heat synchronization with their AI and embryo transfer (ET) programs at breeding to get cows to calve in a relatively short period of time. Ultrasound pregnancy testing is also done, which allows them to group 40-50 females into separate calving pastures of about 80 acres of native grass.

Using pasture rotations during the summer, Gordon explains that they try to use grass that has not been grazed for the previous 30-60 days.

“This size pasture will allow the female to select her own special calving area and get away from the rest of the herd, but it is small enough that we can use a four-wheeler to check the pasture for new calves fairly quickly,” Gordon says.

He reports that they normally only check pastures once a day, saying, “Our experience has been that even first-calf heifers will select their calving area and calve easily if proper bull selection is used, and if humans stay out of the way.”