



Field Notes

► by **John Dickinson** and **Vern Frey**, regional managers, American Angus Association

Management tips for calving

With the new year comes a new spring calf crop. Regional managers John Dickinson and Vern Frey offer production tips at calving time.

How do you advise producers tighten their calving season?

John Dickinson: The quickest way to tighten your calving season would be to implement a well-managed synchronization program with your artificial insemination (AI) schedule. There are many out there to choose from; you just need to determine which program best fits your management situation.

Look at your facilities first. If you are set up for feeding cattle with bunks or in a lot, you might want to consider using a combination of melengestrol acetate (MGA) and prostaglandin. This is a very effective technique with particularly good results on heifers. This protocol also requires heat detection.

There are additional programs that utilize different combinations of prostaglandins and/or gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH). Some are timed-breeding programs, while others, like the MGA protocol, require heat detection. Determine your time and labor capacity, then choose a synchronization program that accommodates those levels.

A natural service clean-up bull can also help keep your calving interval low by covering those females that may not have been bred AI. Another option would be to simply sell later-calving cows and guarantee a tighter calving window.

Reproduction is a crucial trait that can add value to your herd. However, it is also a lowly heritable trait that is hard to select for genetically. Sometimes the best results come from intense management. For increased profitability, try to keep your calving season within 45-60 days.

Vern Frey: The first suggestion I would give producers who want to tighten their calving season is to look at their nutrition program. Cows and heifers must be on a balanced ration to gain weight and be in good condition to cycle. This will give the group an opportunity to cycle during a 21-day period.

The second suggestion is to implement a vaccination program to protect them from diseases. Most importantly, vaccinate against infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR), bovine viral diarrhea (BVD) and any other disease that would affect a female's ability to become pregnant.

Bulls must also follow good nutrition and health

programs, and breeding soundness exams are a must. Bulls should not have excessive weight condition that would affect their ability to service cows or heifers. Also, be reasonable when putting a group of cows or heifers with a bull. Don't put more in a group than a bull can comfortably service. Bull age should be considered, because an older bull should be able to service more cows.

Be observant. Watch your groups so you recognize when cows and heifers are cycling and when bulls are servicing. Around the 21-day period, check to see if more females than normal are cycling again. Females that don't show estrus will probably be late, so cull them to tighten your program.

Why does the calving ease (CE) expected progeny difference (EPD) apply only to first-calf heifers?

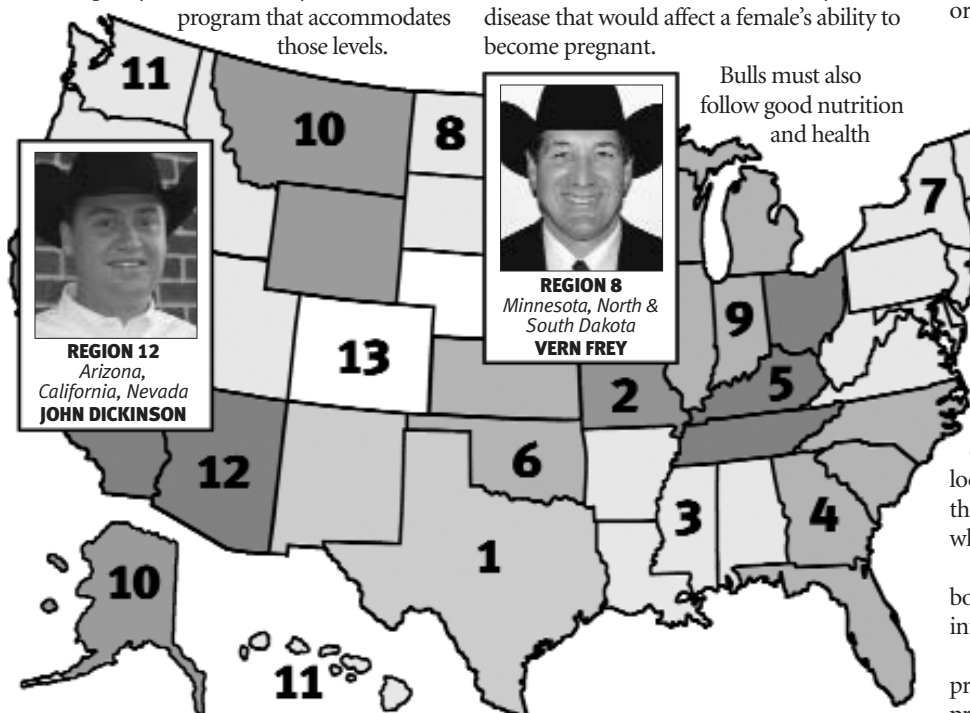
Frey: Because of their age, size and development, heifers will experience more calving difficulties than cows. Therefore, when we talk about calving ease, our main concern is always about calving out first-calf heifers.

What is an ideal body condition score (BCS) at calving time, and what management practices should producers employ to reach that target?

Dickinson: Cows should have a BCS of 5 or higher (on a 9-point scale) at time of calving. This conditional state is crucial to reproductive performance and the ability to breed back. With a lower BCS, postpartum interval increases and your calving window begins to widen for next year. After birth, a cow's energy requirement shifts to milk production, and she will need that stored energy. Make sure your cows have ample BCS prior to calving. If not, supplementation is necessary. This will vary greatly across the country depending on your location and environment. Wherever your cows are located, get a feel for the energy and protein that is available to them, then fill in the gaps where needed.

For more information on maintaining body condition, check out the useful information at www.cowbcs.info.

Frey: An ideal body condition would probably be a 5 or a 6. A good nutrition program will attain this. Many times cattle



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will forage after weaning, and the protein content in the forages is not readily available. Check your feedstuffs, and make sure you supplement protein if needed to maintain cows in good condition. It's easier to maintain condition than it is to let cows get thin and then try to regain condition.

When should birth weights be taken?

Dickinson: Calves should be weighed within 24 hours of birth. At this time, you can also record a calving ease score on your females and/or note any calving irregularities, if applicable.

What methods do you recommend for taking birth weights?

Dickinson: When taking birth weights, *always* use a scale. Instruments like tapes do not give you an accurate measurement, and they tend to become even less accurate when dealing with extreme weights (both light and heavy). If you want a clear and precise look at the birth weight variation in your herd that will be of any use down the road, stick with the scale.

For twins, the Association records the birth weight measurements, but twin information is not used to calculate interim EPDs or put into the National Cattle Evaluation (NCE). They will get NCE EPDs when they become parents.

When should ear tattoos be applied?

Frey: Application will probably depend on individual operation size. An ideal time would be when calves are turned out on grass with their mothers. Spring vaccinations and branding in my region are common practices. Since the calf has already been caught and worked, it is an excellent time to tattoo. An added bonus to this practice is that any tags lost during the summer can be easily replaced by checking the tattoo.

How can calves' ears best be salvaged from the elements?

Frey: Facilities are a top priority. If you're going to be calving in the elements, you should have a place where the cow and calf can go to get out of the elements. A small, heated room [10 feet (ft.) × 10 ft. is sufficient] where the cow can be put right before or immediately after calving is strongly advised. Once a calf is dry, ears should be okay. Hot boxes or small calf shelters also help. You can buy socks or hoods to put over ears to keep from freezing. You're certainly not going to save them all, but these things will help.

Freeze brands and hot iron brands can be used for identification (ID) if ears are lost.

