

Fond of Fall

These Angus breeders share why fall calving works in their operations.

by Kindra Gordon

It's mid-August and Ed Raithel, manager of Herbst Angus Farms at Falls City, Neb., in the southeast corner of the state, is gearing up for calving season. Actually, there's not much preparation that needs to be made because, as Raithel puts it, "fall calving is easy. There's no calving barn to care for, and pasture calving is great because fall weather is generally nice."

Although the majority of their herd calves in the spring, Herbst Angus Farms manages its fall-calving program with 30 cows from late August to Oct. 1. Many of the females are donor cows, which Raithel says works perfectly for fall calving.

Another reason Raithel likes fall calving is because he has 18-month-old bulls to sell at their annual spring production sale. Those older bulls, he says, are in demand among buyers.

The selling points

Others with fall calving programs cite similar reasons for finding favor with this less-traditional calving period.

John and Laurie Widdowson of SandPoint Cattle Co. have maintained both a spring- and a fall-calving herd since getting started in the cattle business in 1996. They originally

began with John's parents in central Nebraska on a farm that had been in the family for five generations. Then in 2004, John, Laurie and their three young sons moved their herd to Lodgepole, Neb., in the Sandhills on the western edge of the state.

Widdowson explains that they initially got started with fall calving somewhat by chance. He says that as they were buying cows to put their herd together they bought some fall-calvers and simply continued with a spring and a fall herd.

As their numbers have grown, Widdowson says having a spring- and a fall-calving herd makes sense because it spreads out labor and is easier on facilities. Today they maintain 1,100 registered Angus pairs with an extensive artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) program and have five full-time employees.



"We like to have a tight calving window, and spring-calving 1,100 cows in 45 days along with the spring farming we do isn't physically possible," Widdowson says.

This year they'll calve 400 cows from Aug. 25 to Oct. 1, with 275 of those being ET calves.

Additionally, Widdowson says fall calving suits their operation from a marketing

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Other tips for fall calving

Ben Eggers, manager of Sydenstricker Genetics at Mexico, Mo., shares these observations to enhance fall calving.

1. Silage can be an excellent feed during the breeding season.
2. After cows are bred in January, they go through February and March on hay.
3. In April there is some grass for them to graze, with better forage quality in May.
4. Calves are typically weaned in early to mid-May. "This means the calves stay on the cows longer than spring calves usually do," Eggers says, "but the grass is good enough by weaning time that the cows really bounce back quickly."
5. Weaned bull calves are fed on grass through the summer with a self-feeder, using a fairly hot ration of corn, protein and limiters, but no additional roughage. Heifer calves are developed mostly on grass, along with some grain supplementation, depending on the quality of the summer grass. Yearling measurements are taken in September on the bulls and in November on the replacement heifers.
6. After the Sydenstricker bulls complete their postweaning test and yearling measurements, they are transitioned to silage and hay, continuing to graze on grass until the annual production sale in November.

standpoint. “We have a lot of buyers who want older bulls,” he explains. “We’ve found we get a higher value out of our 18-month-old bulls without some of the headaches of raising 2-year-old bulls.”

At Sydenstricker Genetics, Mexico, Mo., manager Ben Eggers reports they’ve had a fall-calving herd for the 24 years he’s been there. They calve from about Sept. 10 to the end of October and are working to get their fall-calving herd equal in size to their spring-calving herd.

Eggers considers the ability to sell older bulls as a primary advantage to fall calving. “With most producers spring calving yet in this area, it offers an 18- to 20-month-old bull at turnout time,” he says, “which usually works for the bull buyers who think they need a 2-year-old.”

Eggers also likes the fall option for donor management. “You can flush a cow two to four times, yet only extend her calving interval by half a year, moving her from spring to fall or fall to spring,” he explains. “This helps keep the donors from putting on as much excess fat as they typically do when flushed for an entire year.”

Widdowson says fall calving works well for their donor cows, too. SandPoint Cattle Co. will transplant 600-700 embryos per year. “Since we flush cows every month, fall calving helps accelerate our genetic turnaround time,” he says.

Another attribute of fall calving is the ability for purebred or commercial operations to utilize natural herd sires more efficiently, Eggers points out. “With the bulls working two seasons per year rather than one, you add efficiency and you keep the bulls in better shape.”

Mostly sunshine

Another positive with fall calving tends to be the weather. “We can calve everything outside in the pasture, and seldom have the mud problems we have with January-through-March calving,” Eggers says. He adds that they rarely encounter extremely cold weather during their fall calving.

If anything, heat can be a concern. Eggers reports their birth weights are generally 6-10 pounds (lb.) lighter in the fall, especially in September, due to fescue endophyte and heat stress that cows may experience 60 days prior to calving.

South Dakotan considers calving switch from spring to fall

Angus breeder David Koupal, Wagner, S.D., is considering making the switch to fall calving, primarily to better match his work schedule.

Koupal works full-time as an ag education teacher and FFA advisor at the Wagner public school. Presently, he calves in January and February and pastures his cows with his parents’, LaVern and Alice Koupal’s, Angus herd during that time. David often takes the night watch from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. and teaches during the day.

“That gets to be a long day,” he says.

With fall calving, he would aim to calve mid-August. Although school would just be starting then, Koupal says the weather is better for calving, cows still have grass to graze and there are more hours of daylight.

Koupal would plan to offer 18-month-old bulls in the annual Koupal Angus sale in February with his parents and brother. He has done his homework and watched sale reports from the past and says 18-month-old bulls tend to average better than yearlings and 2-year-olds.

He’s also optimistic that for feeder calves he may have to sell, June appears to be a consistently better market than the traditional fall months.

Koupal says making the decision to switch is a difficult one because he has worked hard to build up the genetics in his spring herd. Ultimately, he feels the move to fall will better fit his work schedule.

He had considered holding his spring herd back and breeding them for fall, but economically he’d lose out on one year’s calf crop. Thus, he says, he’ll sell and rebuild.

Koupal’s goal is to eventually have 100 fall pairs. But he says he is willing to start with 30 head and take time to build good genetics from there.

“This tends to hold down the actual birth weights out of mature cows,” Eggers says. As a result, they often use higher-birth-weight-EPD sires on mature cows that calve in the fall to create the higher-growth, larger-framed bulls that are preferred by many of their customers.

Raithel says he, too, has found that fall-calving birth weights are about 8 lb. lighter, so he uses the fall program as an opportunity to breed to higher-birth-weight bulls.

Eggers issues one caution. He says after an

especially hot, stressful summer, calves out of heifers can be too small. “Not many 45- to 55-lb. bull calves can catch up well enough to be impressive at yearling time,” he says.

Extras in winter

Both Raithel and Widdowson admit that with fall calving you’ve got to take care of the calves a little more during winter.

“We calve in August and September, so we can get calves off to a good start before winter, but we do supplement some,” Widdowson says.

But neither of these Nebraskans report having problems with winter breeding and conception rates. They tend to synchronize cows and breed in late November and watch for any repeated heat cycles right before Christmas.

Being located farther south, Eggers doesn’t cite winter weather as a problem with calves, but because Sydenstricker Genetics breeds in late December and January, he says, a severe blast of winter weather at that time can cut conception rates. He’s learned cows will not show a good visual estrus, even with the bull, if the weather is severe.

Can it work anywhere?

These breeders agree that fall calving likely won’t work in the extremely cold regions, but they do feel more breeders in moderate climates could make it work.

“From here South, I believe it is superior to spring calving,” Eggers says.

Raithel adds, “If more people in Nebraska tried this, they’d wonder why they calve in the spring.”

Widdowson says the biggest drawback to fall calving for their operation is that they never seem to have a slow time. “We are either breeding, calving or weaning every month of the year. But that’s what we do, and we love it.”

His advice to others when it comes to fall calving is to “see what matches up with your operation.”

For Widdowson, he says there’s a certain thrill in having two calving seasons. He says, “I’m a numbers guru and this gives us another set of calves to test a bull. I can implement new bulls in my fall program and get newer genetics about six months ahead of spring-only herds. Seeing that new calf crop always keeps it fun.”

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— Ed Raithel