

Birth Right

Pros and cons to different calving seasons.

by Heather Smith Thomas

There is no perfect time to calve, but certain calving seasons are more conducive to a particular operation's climate, market goals, management resources and a host of other considerations.

For the purposes of this article, early calving refers to January-February, spring calving to March-April, summer to May-June or June-July and fall to August-October.

Traditionally, most beef calves in the United States are born in late winter and early spring — February through April — a calving season historically rooted in the idea of weaning calves in the fall with the opportunity to grow them through the winter. Although some calves go directly to the feedlot, labor challenges associated with managing the health of young calves means many first go through a stocker or backgrounding phase.

Economics play a role, too. Feedlots may shift buying preference for lighter or heavier calves based on the value of gain, which is partly determined by feed costs.

pasture, explains John Campbell, DVM, professor with the Western College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan. Compared to calving earlier in confined areas, such as calving barns, he says calving later in more open areas reduces calf death loss and sickness.

“Another advantage of calving later is that cows calving on pasture have more exercise than when confined in winter for closer monitoring,” Campbell explains. “Folks who calve later see fewer dystocia problems.”

Some of that could stem from choosing easier calving bulls, but he says it could also be partly due to cows getting more exercise and being in better physical shape at calving time.

There is also research suggesting cows calving earlier in cold climates have calves with heavier birth weights. Cows in these conditions are often fed with the requirements of cold weather maintenance in mind. When a cow is trying to maintain body heat, more blood is concentrated around internal organs, including the uterus, bringing more nutrients to the fetus when it is growing fastest during the last two months of gestation. The notion is that both factors contribute to a heavier winter-born birth weight associated with potential calving problems. Also, experience suggests cows tend to calve easier on green pasture than when confined and fed hay.

Tradeoffs to calving later

Shifting the calving season from spring to summer or fall comes with other advantages and challenges.

For instance, calving later in late spring or early summer means breeding during the hottest times of the year.

“One thing we see with a later calving season and later breeding is that breeding in July-August has a slightly lower pregnancy percentage, which might be caused by poorer pasture quality when cows are lactating during that breeding period,” says Campbell. Breeding during the hottest part of the year can also lead to embryo loss in cows and reduced bull fertility.

“The downside of calving late in the year in some regions is that the quality of forage is declining. The protein level is lower as grasses dry out,” Ahola explains. “You can supplement with protein but this might not be the best scenario in terms of matching the cows to their environment. It depends on where you are. In the Southeastern U.S., the grass starts to come back in the fall because

weather is starting to cool off, and grasses that went through a summer slump in hot, dry weather are greening up again.”

Moreover, Ahola says producers calving in early summer need to decide when and how to wean later-born calves. Weaning them in the fall, when they're 4 or 5 months old could be too early. Waiting until January could be too cold.

Some who calve May-June still wean in November to avoid feeding hay to lactating cows, Ahola says. He notes summer-born calves on irrigated pastures grow faster than earlier-born calves on dry rangelands. By November, the weight of both groups will be similar.

On the other hand, Ahola explains a few producers leave summer-born calves on their mamas through the winter and then wean them in March. Cows are past peak lactation by then and some are already self-weaning their calves. The cows have time to recover on green grass and be ready to calve again in May or June.

Photo by Denise Amos



Photo by Pam Richards



Cow-calf producers traditionally favor spring calving based on resources and management, even though it means feeding cows through the winter, during early lactation, when their nutritional needs are the highest and when cold, wet weather can challenge new calves.

Unsurprisingly, Colorado State University (CSU) beef systems students often wonder why so much calving occurs during a time of year when there is no grass. They wonder why more calves aren't born later in the year like wildlife.

“This is a legitimate question,” says Jason Ahola, a CSU beef management systems specialist who teaches the beef systems class. “There are definitely benefits, but in the West, many ranchers calve in January because they want cows bred before they go to summer range.”

Ahola explains many ranchers in that part of the world depend on permits and leases issued by the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Forest Service. Producers need calves on the ground and cows bred before turning them out on public lands.

For those unfamiliar with these resources, calving and breeding on western rangelands is often a poor management option. Consider only the breeding part of the equation. The vast geography requires more bulls. Even then, the breeding season and subsequent calving season are strung out and lengthened. Plus, some leases and permits are shared between ranches. In those instances, it is impossible to ensure heifers are bred to selected calving ease bulls or that cows are bred to a bull battery chosen for specific genetic improvement.

Where possible, though, some producers are moving to later calving, when the weather is warmer and cows can calve on open

Whether leaving the calves on the cows through winter is an option can depend on available nutrition.

Plus, Ahola points out breeding later in the season can also reduce costs when bulls can be shared with someone else whose herd calves earlier.

“As long as the bulls are trich tested and healthy, this is a way to cut bull costs. Most bulls work for only about 60 days of the year,” says Ahola. In a shared-bull situation, he explains bulls could be rested a few weeks after their early breeding season and then be used again.

“Even if you had to increase the bull to cow ratio a little, this could save money. The same thing with AI. If you are having trouble finding someone to do your AI when everyone else is doing it, this would be a chance to utilize these technicians when they are not busy,” Ahola says.

Weaning later has some market advantages, too.

“In our area the market is seasonal, with most calves hitting the market in November (and prices dropping). If you market calves later — in February, March or April — prices may be better again,” Campbell says.

Fall calving season also provides unique marketing opportunities.

“The summer-grazing segment of our industry, versus the cow-calf, feedlot and packer sectors is the most consistently profitable,” Ahola says. “It’s low cost, if you have the grass. You can kick those weaned calves out as soon as the grass is ready, and gather them up at the end of summer when grass begins to decline, with maximum gain. Part of your income is from gain on the yearlings; you may not have to own as many cows.”

On the other side of the scale, producers with fall-calving herds in cold climates can face a situation similar to those calving in January-February with higher winter feed costs associated with carrying lactating cows through winter.

Seedstock considerations

Sometimes it’s more difficult for a seedstock producer to change calving season than it is for a commercial producer.

“If customers have been coming to your place to buy yearling bulls in a spring bull sale for the past 10 years, and you move your calving season and those bulls are only 9 months old at that time, you can’t sell them that young,” Ahola says. “Just like the range user, you are locked into a certain time of year that you need to calve.

“You may have to sell 18-month-old bulls. Some operations have done this. My own situation is a seedstock operation, and we calve much earlier than we should. We start the end of January to produce bulls that are old enough to market in our sale. There’s no other way to do it unless you sell 2-year-olds. Many 2-year-olds sell for about the same price as a yearling, yet you have an additional year of feed cost. It’s hard for seedstock operations to change unless they go to fall and spring calving (dual calving season). This gives the customer the option of buying bulls that are older than yearlings, but not yet 2-year-olds. Some stockmen prefer the 18-month-old bull that can handle a few more cows and more rugged conditions than a yearling.”

A Nebraska seedstock producer serves as another example. The operation calved February-March for many years because it sold yearling bulls. It also fought scours and pneumonia in young calves. This operation shifted to calving in August-September. Bulls are now sold at 18 months of age rather than at 14 months. Cost of production decreased with less need for grain and more opportunity to utilize forage. Bull yearling weights are lighter, but the genetic potential is the same. **HW**

Editor’s Note: Heather Smith Thomas and her husband, Lynn, have ranched near Salmon, Idaho for more than four decades. She also writes cattle articles that appear in numerous U.S. and Canadian cattle publications, including *Hereford World*. She is the author of numerous books, including “The Cattle Health Handbook.”