

News Column

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NIGHT FEEDING – ITS THAT TIME OF YEAR

When I first started reading about experiments with feeding cows at night get them to calve during daylight hours, the feeding time was 10:00 p.m. I didn't like that feeding schedule and I never tried it when I owned cows,...35 years ago.

Yes, the night feeding concept has been around for at least 35 years. And, yes, it does work. Many cattlemen have been feeding at night (late afternoon) for years and would never go back to daytime feeding.

Others must not have liked the 10:00 p.m. feeding time either because recent research has been conducted using late afternoon feeding times, between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. I use the word "recent" pretty loosely – some of that research is over 20 years old.

Feeding cows in the evening, instead of in the morning, will cause the majority of calves to be born during daylight hours. Not everybody feeds in the evening – and for good reason,... it is easier to feed in the morning while the ground is frozen – but night feeding really does work.

Research done at Kansas State University over a five year period, involving 537 births, document 85.4% of calves born between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., when cows were fed in the evening (between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.).

Many studies have been done over the years, with similar results. In an Iowa study, 1331 cows on 15 farms were fed at dusk, resulting in 85% of the calves born between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

The science behind this phenomenon – what actually causes the cows to calve during daylight hours – is unknown. Some claim it has to do with heat generated during rumination, but there is no research to back up that theory. We really don't know why night feeding works, only that it does.

Skeptics probably would like to know what happens if cows are fed in the morning – how many would calve during the day anyway? The short answer is about half.

The University of Idaho conducted a study over a 15-year period using 256 different cows, and recorded 1,210 observations. In their study, cows were fed ad libitum (full feed) in the morning, between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. The result was 52% of calves born during daylight hours (6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) and 48% born at night.

The night feeding concept is called the Konefal method, named after Canadian rancher Gus Konefal who reported his observations in the 1970s. In an early Canadian study, testing Konefal's claims, 38.4% of cows calved during the day when fed at 8:00 a.m. and again at 3:00 p.m. Cows in the same study fed at 11:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. delivered 79.6% of their calves during daylight hours.

Many cattlemen provide big round bales to cows round-the-clock, and only feed when the bales are gone. That creates a challenge to the night feeding concept, but that system has been researched too.

In an Oklahoma State University study cows had access to big round bales round-the-clock, but supplement was fed at dusk. In that system 70% of calves were born during daylight hours.

Night feeding still isn't going to eliminate the need for those middle of the night heifer checks. You're still going to lose sleep during calving season, but maybe you'll get back to sleep

sooner, after you have checked and found there is no activity in the calving pasture.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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