

News Column
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SPRING CALVING

As a kid growing up, and later when I owned my own cows, I was just as confused as the average cattleman. I thought spring started in February.

Forty years ago, and 150 miles west of here, there was often snow on the ground in February. It could be really cold,...or it could be wet and muddy, but still cold. Yet, our spring calving cows started calving in February.

February is NOT spring. Yet, nobody ever told me that I had a winter calving herd instead of a spring calving herd. I had to figure that out on my own.

The truth would be that I had a winter and spring calving herd because the calving season stretched over 110 days or so. I'm just thankful that spring lasts until June 20 so I don't have to admit to calving in three seasons. That cow that calved in June always raised a big calf – and she never did move up to calve earlier in the year.

After my brother got married I got acquainted with his father-in-law and always enjoyed visiting with him about farming. He was a guy who wasn't afraid to be different. He did what worked for him and wasn't concerned with what the neighbors thought.

The way Don explained his summer calving cow herd, it kind of made sense to me. It was no accident. He didn't calve in the spring, and have a bunch born in the summer too. He wanted them born after going to grass for the summer, I think mostly in June, and he turned the bulls out at the right time to make that happen.

When he told me about his summer calving, he admitted it was different from what others were doing, but he said it worked well for him. He didn't have to match up cows and calves and haul them to pasture – the calves were born on pasture and he brought them home with the cows in the fall.

Another benefit to his later calving was that cows were on good grass and enjoying excellent nutrition right before calving and during early lactation. They did, however, breed back during the heat of the summer and he admitted that some producers would be concerned about that. It hadn't been a problem for him though.

If I were ever to get back in the cattle business, I would go with a true spring calving season. Spring starts March 20, and the weather is often bearable at that time of year.

Yes, it can get muddy in March. And, yes, I remember searching for newborn calves during a wet, April blizzard in the early 1980s. But I still like the odds of keeping a calf alive in March or April over January and February.

The other really good reason to calve in late March and April is to better match the cows nutritional needs to her environment. Late gestation and early lactation are when cows need the most energy. If we calve when the grass is starting to grow, instead of on the coldest day of the year, cows can thrive on what is growing, instead of needing expensive harvested forages and supplements.

Pulling the trigger and moving the calving season back a month or two is a hard call to make because there is no turning back. Once you do it, you're stuck,....unless you buy a new set of cows. However, I think it makes sense for a lot of folks.

If you're locked into always selling your calves the day they come off grass, then you'll hate be because your calves will be lighter – entirely due to calf age – when you sell on

November 1. But, if your marketing date is flexible, later calving should be more profitable because cows will need less supplemental feed to make it through the winter.

Obviously, it's your call, but I will say it one more time. Spring starts in March, and not in January or February.

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 gmclure@ksu.edu.

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