

Small Farm Series: Justification for a Controlled Breeding and Calving Season

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Of all the management practices that are discussed to improve the economic success of cow/calf production, having a defined calving season is the most important. In fact, it is better to think of it as a gateway or tool that must be implemented to allow other management practices to be used. Most of the other practices cannot be easily done if calves are not similar in age and cows are not at the same place in their production cycle. Let's look at a few examples of that and then consider the improved marketing potential of a uniform calf crop.

One good example of a management practice that is difficult to apply correctly for year-round calving herds is a good vaccination protocol. Imagine having 7-month-old calves in the same pasture with 3-month-old calves and newborn calves. These calves are not all ready to be given the same vaccinations at any one point in time. Gathering just a few calves at a time when they reach the appropriate age for a given vaccination is inefficient and is rarely maintained diligently. So, health of the cows and calves suffer in year-round calving herds.

Similarly, consider nutritional management. Providing the right nutrition (not too much and not too little) to a dry cow that is in the same pasture with a cow nursing a 2-month-old calf is impossible. Either the dry cow is getting more nutrition than it needs - stocking rate could be increased, could be on lower quality hay/pasture – or the cow in peak lactation is getting less nutrition than she needs and will lose body condition. To say it another way, supplementing lactating cows in the same pasture with dry cows (that do not need extra nutrition) wastes feed/money.

Improving calf crop uniformity (ages, size, weight, color and breed type) can also provide more marketing opportunities. Many years of market data from across the country shows that marketing groups of uniform calves together, as opposed to one-at-a-time, results in a higher average price per pound. Buyers are able to pay more for uniform groups (even as small as five head) because it reduces the time and labor they spend on assembling truck-load lots. Essentially, they are paying the seller for making their job more efficient.

With that evidence, it seems logical that most cattle producers would have a defined calving season. But, the National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS; another USDA source for cattle production statistics) reports that less than half of the small herds across the country had a defined calving season in 2008. Again, the most likely reason is that small herds are not often the primary source of income for a producer – leading to less incentive to improve revenue. The two most common arguments against having a controlled breeding and calving season are: “I do not have anywhere to put the bull when it is not with the cows” and “I like having a calf ready to sale whenever I need it throughout the year.”

It is true that the bull needs to be out of the pasture for a period of time. But, it does not have to be the entire balance of the time outside of the breeding season. The bull should be separate from the cows when they are calving and until the breeding season starts again. But, the bull can

remain in the pasture after you plan to end your calving season. For example, if it remains in the pasture longer than your planned 90-day breeding season, ask the veterinarian to tell you which pregnant cows will not calve in your calving season and market them as bred replacements that might fit into someone else's calving season. This flexibility could make it easier to make use of bull leasing programs or buying bulls together with another producer that uses a different breeding season.

To the point about a continuous stream of revenue for year-round calving by having staggered availability of weaning aged calves; recall the discussion about limited management options for health and nutrition. Having a calf available to sell at any given time seems less important than increasing the overall profitability and ease of management. Also consider the opportunity to concentrate the time spent on calving management. If all the cows are calving within a defined period of time, it is easier to watch them diligently, assist when needed and reduce death loss (both calves and cows/heifers). In other words, labor can be scheduled for the calving season whereas year-round calving leads to missing more calving difficulties. That results in thousands of dollars lost if a cow and calf die calving while the producer is out of town or not expecting calves to arrive at random times.

If this discussion has led you to consider a controlled breeding/calving season, next month's article will outline how to choose when is the best time to calve for different market trends and production issues. From there, an example of moving from year-round calving to a 90-day calving period will be outlined. So, stay tuned and stay warm.