

How Long is Too Long

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How Long is Too Long?

With July upon us, the bulls are turned out and have hopefully been working very hard the last few weeks.

If the cows calved on time and were in good shape at calving, they are probably bred by now. That begs the question: What is the cow worth that was bred on the first day of the breeding season, as opposed to the cow that was bred much later? Additionally, how long should that breeding season be? I realize that some of you don't have the option to pull bulls off the range after 60 or 90 days, and even if you did, what about the neighbors? Despite that, I would like to talk a little about the length of the breeding season and its effect on profitability.

The recent Cattle Fax Cow-Calf Survey indicated that 45% of operations calved out 75% of their cows in the first 45 Days of the breeding season. Does your operation track this metric? Cattle Fax also sorts the operations into three groups based on their profitability in the last year (high, average and low). Not surprisingly, the majority of the high-profitability producers completed calving within 45 days. How do early breeding cows make an operation more profitable?

With that question in mind, I put together a model to evaluate the change in value per calf as the percentage of cows calving in the first 45 days changes. I made the following assumptions: A 500-pound calf is worth \$4.00 per pound, and the slide is \$0.40/pound. The calves were weaned at 8 months of age after a 90-day calving season.

To start with, the calf born on the first day of the calving season was 180 pounds heavier than the calf born on the last day. Figuring in the slide, the older calf brought back \$382 more! I think it is safe to assume that the cow calving later absorbed just as much cost as the early calver. If so, that's a \$382 difference in value derived from those two cows.

Assuming a baseline where 80% of cows calve within the first 45 days, the average weaning weight of calves

decreases by 4.5 pounds for every 1% decline in the early calving rate. That amounts to a tax of nearly \$10.00 per calf or \$9.00 per cow for a five percentage point move down. That's not just a tax on the late calvers but on every cow and calf in the herd!

The bottom line is that late-calving cows are robbing many ranchers of their profitability. Once a cow calves later, she will likely always calve later, making it very difficult to change the trend.

So, what can be done to improve the breeding/calving window? At risk of leaving some things out, I will give you a few ideas:

1. Reproduction is the most critical aspect of successful ranching. Select cows that fit your environment. Selection for growth and carcass quality should not come at the expense of reproductive performance.
2. Match your management plan to fit your environment. Your cow's highest nutritional needs should be matched with the highest and best forage production.
3. Maintain body condition such that your cows calve in a body condition of 5 or better. Adhering to point # 2 will help you do this more economically.
4. Consider calving your heifers two to four weeks ahead of your cowherd. This allows them extra time to get in synch with the calving season.
5. Cull for poor reproductive performance. Culling open cows is most always a good practice, but cull late calving cows whenever your stocking rate allows it.
6. Ensure that your vaccination program is protecting you from disease issues that may be causing cows to slip an early pregnancy.
7. Ensure that your bulls are in good condition and can breed when the time comes. A thorough Breeding Soundness Exam for each bull is a must.

Have a great summer and remember the greatness of our country as you celebrate the nation's 249th birthday with gratitude for those who have sacrificed much for all to pursue our life's passions and enjoy the fruits of freedom!

Please feel free to reach out anytime.

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