

# *Calving Your Beef Cows Outside the Box*

Beef cow/calf producers in the Midwest are quite traditional in their fondness for late-winter calving and selling feeder calves off pasture come fall. That tradition can be questioned as to whether that is the best practice for a particular farm, according to Ben Bartlett, a Michigan State University Livestock Agent.

Winter feeding is the crux of the beef cow business. However, the midwest also has advantages of being able to grow lower cost forages, access to low cost grain and energy alternatives along with a panoply of marketing alternatives.

Thinking “outside the box” to design a cow-calf operation for the purpose of making money is to realize our winter feed and part-time labor with our strength of quality feed. How can a system be designed to minimize the negative and accentuate the positive? One option may be to calve in late May or early June.

By calving later, one can minimize the amount of stored feeds that are needed to maintain the cow. Calving in warmer weather can also lead to fewer calf losses and less labor. This later calving cow can spend more time scavenging for winter feed on corn stalks and stockpiled pasture as a lactating cow has almost double the requirements of a dry cow in mid-gestation.

Moreover, later calving is also matched up nutritionally with early pasture which is ideal for meeting the needs of cows in late-gestation. The decrease in labor requirements and calf death loss from later calving are due to reduced stress and less frequent checking. Nebraska research has shown reduced calf birth weights for less calving difficulties.

Cows also have a quicker return to estrus as days lengthen. A cow calving in January at a body score of 6 requires 84 days to return to estrus versus returning to estrus in 31 days if calving in June. This could increase opportunities for the cow to become pregnant and stay in the herd.

The downside to pushing calving into late spring is the smaller calf to sell. But, who says one needs to sell the calf in the fall? Using the strength of high quality forage and access to grains may be an opportunity to winter this lighter weight calf in a cost-effective way. Then, one would have a 700 pound yearling to go to spring pasture to assist with the spring pasture growth and then market or finish at 800-850 pounds in July—not a traditional marketing period but feedlots are often looking for cattle to put on feed at this time. So, in reality, a late-calving producer has a six month window to manage when to market best suited to cash flow needs, feed inventories and labor availability.

Wintering those calves is not without the concerns of weaning, sickness and housing. Demonstrated research in Alberta, Canada on fence-line weaned right on pasture gained almost two pounds per day. The University of Missouri has fence-lined weaned for 12 years on 2,400 calves. Leaving calves to wean on good fall pasture can result in lower stress to the calves and producer.

---

ISU Fact Sheet LT-112 prepared by Larry Tranel, Dairy/Beef and Forage specialist, ISU Extension based on work of Ben Bartlett, MSU Extension livestock agent. May, 2000.