

Shortening the Breeding Season

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By shortening the breeding season, what we are really talking about is shortening the calving season. The decision to shorten the calving season involves several considerations and much thought and planning. Two events in the relatively recent past made us realize the advantages of a short breeding season.

The first event was in 1994/1995. We sold a truck load of steer calves to an individual and retained a 1/4 interest in the calves with both parties agreeing to obtain feedlot data and carcass data in the process. This was our first experience with retained ownership. There was 89 days of age difference from oldest to youngest in these calves. The cattle went on feed 10/1/94 and were killed 4/11/95. They were on feed for 191 days. They were sold on a live weight bid basis, and all killed on the same day. The cattle made a little money in the feedlot phase. They were average cattle in every respect, but averages are deceptive. Within the averages there was a ton of variation. The most glaring variation was in end weight. There was a 650 lb. live weight and a 415 lb. carcass weight variation in the cattle. To people who were trying to produce cattle whose performance was predictable, this was discouraging to say the least.

The second event was when we started to analyze the first couple years of our SPA data. One of the many analyses that is done with your data is that the calf crop is quantified into the percent born in the first 30 days of calving, the second 30 days of calving, and the percent born after that. To put it simply, our cattle were too strung out calving and a relatively small percentage of our cows (late calvers) were costing us in added management and marketing.

One of the things I remember the most about the first SPA workshop I attended was the

admonition from Walter Prevatt of Auburn University to set goals. We have been trying to get back to selling seedstock to commercial cattlemen in Florida. From that meeting came the idea that we would develop cattle that were predictable; The idea that we would develop cattle that would have ability in the pasture (in Florida!!), in the feedlot, and in the packing plant; the idea that we would be successful commercially before we sell seedstock; and the idea that breed, color, or other non-essentials would not be a part of our thinking. We aren't there yet, we have made progress.

What does this have to do with shortening the breeding season? The SPA data reinforced in a big way how important it is for cows to calve at the optimum time. In our area, if you calve outside this optimum time (or window as many people call it), you run into increased costs from having to make up nutritionally for what nature provides naturally if you calve in the window. Also calving outside this window will increase the variation in the size and weight variation within the calf crop. There are arguments against a short calving season. I have heard people say that in marketing 2 or 3 times a year, you aren't putting all your marketing eggs in one basket so to speak. I also saw in print a cattleman who I respected state that he never culled a late calving cow as she was nature's way of protecting against a natural disaster. It is my opinion that neither of these arguments, or any others I've heard, out-weigh the advantages of 1.) calving at the optimum time and 2.) the thought that the larger the number of a uniform set of calves, the larger the buyer interest will be.

In regard to calving at the optimum time of year, this will vary in different areas of the state and different managements of individual operations. Generally it has been my observation that the further south you go, the earlier this time

can be. For us here in north central Florida on our particular farm, we want our calves to be born in December and January. At present, we are putting a little more Brahman breeding in our cattle and we feel this will allow us to calf more in January and early February which is a more economical time for us. More importantly, you will find that the optimum time will be a short time. In the above scenarios, it's 45 to 60 days.

In addition to the marketing advantages I've spoken to, there are even greater management economies that are realized by a short breeding season. On our farm we give nutritional priority to wet cattle over pregnant cattle and young cattle over old. If your cattle are calving together, you can manage different nutrition levels easier. For instance if you are having to supplement wet cows and there are many in the herd that haven't calved yet, this is extra expense. Of course you can segregate wet from drys, but this is still two different management groups that could be one if calving together.

Enough of the why and onto the how. Obviously by shortening the time cows are exposed to the bulls and culling open cows will shorten the calving season. This has been part of our approach and if you do this gradually, no more than two weeks a year, this is a relatively painless process. You will get rid of genetically low fertile and environmentally unadapted cows quickly. This approach assumes that genetics is most of the problem.

I submit to you that at our farm and probably yours, management is at least as much a problem as genetics. It has helped us to get more in the mind set of aligning management practices to get cows pregnant to calve in our time window than culling cows that don't. Toward that end, much of our energies and resources are directed to getting our replacement heifers calving early and maintaining early calving in our second calf cows. On our farm a young female that calves in the last

half of the calf crop is a "wreck fixing to happen."

We are a firm believer in synchronizing heats in our replacement heifers and breeding them two weeks ahead of the cows that have calved. We also pull bulls from the heifers 30 days prior to pulling the bulls from the cows and I believe the 30 days at the end is more important than the 2 weeks at the beginning. We currently have a 60 day breeding season on heifers and 75 on cows, but we frequently, if we have good pregnancy rates, sell off the females that have become pregnant in the last 15 days the bulls were out so effectively we have a 45 day breeding season on heifers and 60 on cows.

When I said synchronize heifers, I did not say AI. We do AI our heifers but you can do it with bulls and be equally as effective, possibly more so. I remember years ago complaining to Dr. Jim Gibb, who at that time was head of education and research for the American Polled Hereford Assn., that most of the trait leading bulls in the APHA were from Canada or Montana or places that were environmentally "antagonistic" to us in Florida. His response was the question that did I think they should publish a regional sire summary. I knew that was practically impossible but thought it was a good idea then and an even better one today. My point is that, in my opinion, a high percentage of the genetics used in beef cattle production today in Florida is selected in environments dramatically different than ours and it is a concern of mine and another reason we are using a little more Brahman breeding in our operation.

I have been talking mainly about cow herd management, but I would like to mention bulls. In a management scheme where the breeding season is short, any breeding bull problems are magnified. In the last couple years that we were producing Polled Hereford bulls, we became interested in Australian research on the serving capacity of bulls. We worked with Dr. Mike Fields of UF Animal Science and Drs. Rolf Larsen and Peter Chenoweth

of UF Veterinary Medicine evaluating bulls. We don't do it anymore but we do look for certain characteristics and personality traits that we, rightly or wrongly, feel go along with success in the breeding pasture. I might add that most of these are easier noticed while raising bulls as opposed to a half day visit to a breeder or a bull sale. We like bulls that are docile yet aggressive. We like the bulls that are the first to the feed trough or the first to move when you rotate pastures. We do not like timidity and bulls that hang back. We like bulls that are alert that seem to know what's going on in the next pasture without charging through a five-strand barbed wire fence to be there. We like bulls with relatively large scrotums, compared within a contemporary group. We like bulls that herd their cows, although they can be aggravating. We like to see a bull "marking his territory." We are strong believers in breeding soundness exams prior to turning bulls out.

I spoke last year about the social interaction between cattle. I won't repeat all that. It's in the proceedings. It is important and has a definite influence on your reproductive success. I also

made comments about gestation length that I won't repeat but are a factor.

I'd like to close emphasizing how important this topic of reproductive efficiency is by referring to something I believe was said at last year's short course by Gary Teague of Colorado. I cannot find it in the proceedings, but if someone else said it or I got it somewhere else, my apologies. In the first part of this presentation I referred to our goal setting in the areas of the pasture on our farm, in the feedlot, and at the packing house. The point was made, I think by Mr. Teague, that the variation in dollar value due to genetic and management decisions from best to worst case in these three areas was \$150, \$50, and \$25, respectively. Where should most of our emphasis be directed in optimizing returns to our capital and labor? This one does not take a rocket scientist.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. A few of the comments I've made have more to do with subjective observation than objective measurement. As such they should not be taken necessarily as fact, but drawn from our experiences at our farm in our local.

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