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EXTENSION

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Moving Up Breeding Season

Producers like to have uniform sets of calves to market each year. Getting the age and subsequent size of calves desired for marketing takes planning. The most significant factor in getting the desired age calf is determining calving season. And simply put, calving season is controlled by breeding season. A producer who would like to move calving season earlier on the calendar needs to begin by planning when breeding season will be.

To move calving season, producers must keep a few numbers in mind. First is the average gestation for a cow of 283 days. Second is cows usually can be bred 45 to 60 days after calving as their reproductive tract will have time to recover and begin to cycle. Adding these two sets of numbers, we need 328 to 343 days from breeding to gestation and include recovery to occur before cows can be re-bred. The last number to consider is the number of days in a calendar year. 365 days does not leave much extra time for a cow to have her one calf per year.

Mathematically, a producer could move breeding season up by 22 to 37 days earlier, but how practical is it? The problem lies in the current calving season itself. Many producers have a goal of a 45 to 60 day calving season. If breeding season is moved earlier in the year, will all the cows be ready for breeding on the first day for breeding? The answer is no. Only the cows who calved 45 or more days prior to the new beginning date of the breeding season have the best chance of being ready for breeding. The good news is, if the new desired calving season is also 45 to 60 days long, the breeding season can be the same length and most of the cow herd will be able to be bred within in the new breeding season.

How much can the calving season be advanced in a calendar year? By the math it can be moved 22 to 37 days earlier, but a producer may want to be cautious in trying to move the cow herd up this much in one breeding year. Let us assume a producer would like to move calving up a full month. It may be more advisable to make the goal be 14 days early the first year and move it up again another 14 days the next year.

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There will always be some outliers in the cow herd. Some cows will calve 10 or more days earlier than the first expected calving date and others will be just as late. There will also be cows who will either be ready to breed before 45 days after calving and some cows who will take more than 60 days to recover. These cows can have an effect on the pregnancy rates of the herd when preg checks are performed, but the overall herd can be successfully moved earlier in the calendar.

There are a few other factors to consider ensuring success in shifting the calving season. The body condition of your cows is important. Studies have shown a considerable difference in pregnancy rates between cows in body condition score (BCS) 4 and those in BCS 5. A good rule of thumb is for every 2 weeks a calf nurses a cow, the cow losses one tenth (1/10) of body condition[1]. To counter this loss, producers need to provide appropriate forage and supplementation which can provide the energy and protein necessary to maintain body condition. Calving difficulties can cause delays in breeding. Any damage, minor or major, to the cow's reproductive tract will take extra time to heal and therefore more time before she can be ready for breeding.

Overall, it is possible to move calving season earlier within limits. Success is dependent upon planning, proper nutrition and recovery of cows.

Resources

[1]Rasby, R. (2007). Early Weaning Beef Calves. The Veterinary Clinics of North America. Food Animal Practice, 23(1), 29–40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cvfa.2007.01.002

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