

NORTH WEST ALLIANCE **nwaci** CONSERVATION INITIATIVE

SPRING OR SUMMER PASTURE CALVING: IS IT FOR YOUR OPERATION?

Each year cow calf producers are finding ways to be more efficient, profitable and environmentally conscience. Moving from winter calving to a spring or summer pasture calving system may seem daunting but in the end it can be one more key factor in creating a more sustainable operation. It makes sense to work with mother nature as opposed to working against her. We will discuss some of the features and benefits of a spring or summer calving system

Manure management — One of the biggest benefits of moving to a spring or summer pasture calving system is the distribution of manure. Calving during this period makes it possible to keep the cows in the field all winter, and so, they will do their own manure spreading. Nutrients from manure and urine deposited in the field over the winter are retained far better than nutrients that are moved from a pen and spread. As a result, feeding in locations that need a fertility boost will reduce the need for purchased fertilizer, as well as eliminating the need for corral cleaning. There is also a reduction in nutrient runoff risk in a pasture winter-

ing system as runoff water is not moving through a heavily concentrated manure pack.

Time management - Reducing the workload and saving time is always needed on any farm operation. When moving to a spring or summer calving program producers find their labor demands decrease significantly. Spring/summer calving producers only have to check their cows once or twice a day during calving as opposed to winter calving every 2-4 hours. As well the time saved in feeding and manure removal is significant.

Feed management - Winter feed and feeding has always been and will probably always remain the biggest cost to a cow/calf producer in Canada. Cows should be at a body condition score of 2.5 at calving, and need to be on a high plane of nutrition after calving to support lactation. Choosing a spring/summer calving period places third trimester during the milder weather, and lactation during grass season, thereby better matching the cow's feed requirements to what is available to her. In a winter calving situation, all of the third trimester, as well as the period of highest milk

production happen during winter. This means that all of the cow's maintenance, calf growth, and later, peak milk production and weight gain for re-breeding requirements need to be covered by hay or silage at a substantial cost. To put it simply, in a winter calving system the cows require the most feed when it is most expensive to provide it to them. Summer pastures provide a high quantity and quality feed stock while the cow is able to feed herself instead being fed intensively and incurring high yardage costs. Milk output is increased when cows are on summer pasture and therefore calves have a higher rate of gain. It has been shown that calves can double their rate of gain in the summer as opposed to the winter. With a higher rate of gain calves will still be able to be weaned in late fall with only a slight weight disadvantage to their winter born cousins. The most substantial cost savings that will occur with a switch so spring/summer calving is the cost of feed as these cows can be brought through the winter on far less feed than winter calving cows.

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Things to think about this Month:

- Defining a Riparian Area
- How to develop a grassed water way
- Grazing Native Grasses

The North West Alliance Conservation Initiative (NWACI) is a partnership between 7 municipalities including, the county of Athabasca, M.D. of Lesser Slave River, Parkland County, Strathcona County, Sturgeon County, County of Thorhild, and Westlock County. This partnership also receives funding from the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture (AESAs) program. The focus of the partnership is to promote and encourage the implementation of practices and techniques that will reduce the impact of agriculture on the environment. For more information or a no charge on farm consultation please contact Mike at 780-939-0602 or Jennifer at 780-939-0618 or www.nwaci.com.

Spring Summer Calving Continued...

Breeding management - Cattle are not seasonal breeders but they do exhibit some seasonal bias, the longer the day length (photoperiod) the quicker the cattle will return to estrous cycling relative to cows that calve in winter months. Exposure to an increased photoperiod increases the concentration of lutenizing hormone that assists with successful reproduction. Stress is also reduced on both the cows and bulls while breeding in the summer. While they are on pasture there is less chance of injury than in slippery icy pens, bulls are happier and healthier as well as the cows.

Herd Health - Calving on pasture during the spring or summer as opposed to confined pens can reduce the incidences of scours and other diseases. Calves are spread out over a larger area not exposed to as much disease pressure. No matter how clean pens are kept disease can still linger in bedding and manure. There are less concerns with mothering problems in less concentrated situations. Calves and mothers have a better chance of bonding without interruption when calving out on pasture. Frozen ears are also not an issue when calving in the warmer weather. Producers also notice that calves are more robust and willing to get up and suckle when born in the spring and summer as opposed to winter when newborn calves are dopy and slow. In most instances predators such as coyotes are less likely to attack in the summer when other smaller prey animals are abundant.

Other things to consider - Like anything else there are challenges to every system; no cattle operation is the same and each will have their own pros and cons. Cows should be calving on dry healthy pastures not wet or poor quality pastures. The distance from home base to the calving pasture should also be considered, as pasture too far away would make checking and managing during calving very difficult. Commuting heavily pregnant cows to pastures a long distance can be very stressful and can cause more harm than good. Handling of the cow and calf can be more difficult in a pasture situation where cows and calves are more difficult to catch and handle. While calving problems are far less in a spring/summer setting, some will still occur, and it is a good idea to have access to a portable maternity pen, expertise in roping or the possibility of moving the cow to a nearby handling facility. If calving is delayed too late in the summer insects can be a concern so control methods should be considered or a different location be determined until after calving. Be prepared to have less ability to manage! When cows are calving out on pasture the producer has less control, they need to be willing to trust that the management decisions they made will work. Calf marketing will also change, different marketing options will need to be looked at and considered but they are available and work well. Later calving may require you to have the ability to background calves into or right through the winter as selling into the fall calf run may not be an option.

If you are looking at making your operation more efficient, profitable and environmentally conscience consider switching to a spring or summer pasture calving program. This system is not for everyone but it may be an option for your operation, give the NWACI a call and they can assist you in weighing out your options.

How to Develop a Grassed Waterway

The best way to avoid erosion in a gully is to grass the area. A grassed waterway is wide and shallow and can carry a large volume of water quickly down a steep slope. It can also be crossed by equipment when lifted. A well built and maintained grassed waterway is very durable and erosion resistant. The waterway should be mowed regularly, and weeds and brush must be controlled for the waterway to remain effective. The grass cover must be well established to handle high flows of water without erosion. A newly constructed waterway may need protection until the grass cover is established. An erosion control matt may need to be put down to hold the soil while the grass is establishing. As well a fast growing cover crop such as oats is suggested to be planted during the grass establishment.

What is a Riparian Area?

Riparian areas are the green space around water bodies such as lakes, rivers, streams etc. A healthy riparian area is important to maintain the quality of the water body, avoid erosion and to shelter fish and wildlife. The healthy riparian area will have trees, shrubs, forbs and forages growing all the way to the banks of the water body. It is important to protect these riparian areas.

Water investments: if you don't plan wisely, the risks are high and the returns are poor.

Grazing Native Grasses

Graze native grasses later in the season to take advantage of their adaptation to late season use. This will also allow ground nesting birds and water fowl to complete their spring to early summer nesting without disturbance.

Information from:

Beneficial Management Practices: Environmental Manual for Alberta Farmsteads.

An Introduction to: Water Erosion Control

Alberta Agriculture and Food — www.agric.gov.ab.ca