

Making Life Easier... for Cow-Calf Producers, That Is

A relatively frequent conversation with cow-calf producers revolves around calving seasons. We use that term to describe the time of year cows have their calves. In case you're unfamiliar with cattle, cows are polyestrous which means they cycle year-round and consequently can calve year-round.



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As with anything, there are advantages and disadvantages to this. With cycling year-round, a cow has many opportunities to conceive and give birth—a definite advantage. But for the producer with limited time and who is attempting to sell calves at a particular time of year, having calves year-round is not an advantage. It creates complications regarding when to perform routine health practices for the cowherd, when to market a group of calves, when to give calves their “calthood” vaccinations, etc. In short, it makes management harder.

Some people call determining when cows are exposed to a bull and thus determining when cows calve is called a controlled breeding/controlled calving season. Others call it defined breeding or defined calving season. The advantages are immense. They include:

Labor Savings. Most of us are proceeding through life at a fast trot, running from one thing to another. Pushing the “easy button” when possible—especially when “easy” provides additional benefits, sounds like a good idea! Labor is saved by:

Vaccinating cows once a year. Cows are managed as a group, providing a savings of labor and vaccine cost. With cows calving at about the same time, they can all be vaccinated at the same time. Believe it or not, it will take more time to manage a cow by herself than with a group. Why? As herd animals, they do not like being separated from the group (except when calving or sick).

24-hour a day vigilance for a shorter period of time (think more sleep!) Any producer knows that calving season can be a time of little sleep and maximum vigilance. How nice to know it is necessary for a short period of time instead of all the time.

Vaccination of calves done at one time, providing a savings of labor and vaccine cost—and once again, they are easier to work as a group rather than individuals.

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Although not a labor-saving advantage, having a uniform set of calves (similar ages and weights) to market at one time can provide a profit advantage. Buyers prefer animals of similar size and weight to make a load and most often (depending on market conditions) will pay more for them.

An additional benefit is that the producer can plan to have calves according to the time of year they plan to market, or maximum forage availability, or..... whatever floats your boat! I know of school teachers that plan for their cowherd to calve during the long school break between Christmas and New Year's!

Finally, it's not as hard as you may think to change from an all-year-long calving season to one that is determined by you. It can be done over a few years by gradually changing the time of year and the length of time the bull is with the cowherd. Remember gestation is roughly 9 months and plan accordingly. You can plan to do this over a period of three or five years or whatever works best for you. Occasionally I'll hear someone protest that they will lose some cows/calves. By that they mean that the cow won't be settled in the necessary amount of time to stay in the desired window of calving. Creating a defined calving season doesn't make that happen. It just exposes what has been happening all along. If after a period of adjustment, a cow doesn't have a calf, that exposes that she was not having a calf every 12 months anyway. Now it is just noticeable!

It's not always possible to push the easy button in life. This opportunity is the exception. Life can be made easier by moving the cowherd from year-round calving to a predetermined time set by the producer. For more information, please call your UT/TSU Extension office at 615-898-7710 office or visit our website at rutherford.tennessee.edu.