

Cattle Business in Mississippi – September 2016

“Stocker Cents” article

What’s in a calving season?

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Calving season discussion is often a heated debate among beef producers. Should I calve in the spring or the fall? Do I need to pull my bull? Is it better to be committed to selling calves at a certain time of year or should I have calves available year round? These are common questions beef producers often ask themselves, their neighbors, and the experts when trying to make management decisions. There are two key points that need to be considered when making calving season (or lack thereof) decisions: management and marketing.

These are integral parts of the decision making process for both cow/calf producers and stocker producers. While cow/calf producers have the control over when calves are born, many cow/calf producers background their calves before sale, and essentially function as stocker producers as well.

Management decisions are the key thought that comes to mind when thinking about having a set calving season, and these are often used as an excuse for year round calving. The number one reason I hear from producers of why they can’t manage a defined calving season is related to pasture management, i.e. “I don’t have a place to put my bull”. While this is a legitimate concern for many small producers, it is one that can be easily fixed. Bulls in the “off-season” don’t require large pastures to roam, and can make due on a small space with a little supplement. This could be achieved with even a temporary hot wire fence on a certain area of the pasture.

Another management concern to consider is coordinating cattle work. For producers with a fixed calving season, common management practices become a lot more streamlined. It becomes possible to gather cows 2-3 times a year to vaccinate, pregnancy check, and apply parasite control. If cows run with a bull year-round, it becomes almost impossible to pregnancy check and cull open cows. Since a cow must be close to 28 days to detect a pregnancy, if cows are checked while still running with a bull, it becomes possible that any cow determined open at any given time could be short bred. Some vaccinations or de-wormers cannot be given to pregnant cows, so this means cows would need to be worked at multiple times throughout the year or worse yet skip these practices altogether.

Forage management is another decision that should be taken into account when thinking about calving seasons. Forage quantity and quality is seasonal just like an animal’s nutrient requirements change as a cow goes from one state (gestation to lactation to dry) to the next. If all cows are in synch, it becomes much less work to match cow needs to forage availability, and allows a producer to be much more efficient in supplementing when forage might not meet needs.

While it might seem that a calving season creates more work when it comes to management, it may actually be less labor in the long run. If cows are calving in a defined window, the bulk of your management related labor is restricted to a few months of the year, rather than a year round process.

The other “M” that should be considered in making calving season decisions is marketing. Often I hear producers say, “I don’t want to be tied to one season or marketing window when I

need to sell calves. I want to be able to sell year round in case prices go up.” This becomes a risky game to play. It has been demonstrated time and time again that calves marketed in large uniform groups bring more than calves marketed as singles. This is quite simply because we take a little work out for the next person in the beef production chain. When calves can be marketed as one group, it means we can have less labor involved in gathering and weaning calves just once a year rather than several times throughout. It also means that calves will be more valuable as a group.

While calving season discussions can be a difficult topic, it’s a decision that should be closely and thoroughly analyzed to consider all of the pros and cons. I encourage you to look at the whole picture when making these types of decisions, and consider options in the future. Make sure to think carefully about the two “M’s”, management and marketing. Consider how these might make life a little easier in the long run.

For more information about calving season selection considerations, and information about conversion to a controlled calving season, visit

http://extension.msstate.edu/sites/default/files/publications/publications/p2501_0.pdf

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit extension.msstate.edu/beef.