

LATE CALVING

makes best use of forage for cows, takes advantage of nature

By Jim Waggoner and Mike Smith

When to calve is a frequently asked question by Wyoming producers.

The answer involves the biology of the cow, the resources available to support cow herds along with their costs, and any management limitations that arise.

Early calving (January-March) could be considered the traditional time for calving by many operations in the Intermountain West; however, if a page is taken from Mother Nature's book, we would say late spring to early summer (mid-April to June) is best.

How many newborn antelope and deer fawns or elk calves do you see in January? These young, wild ruminants are born when grass is at or approaching its maximum nutritional quality.

Benefits of Late-season Calving

Calving later reduces or eliminates need for calving sheds, calf shelters, calving labor (as cows calve out on pasture), less death loss due to cold stress and problems such as scours, and less calving problems overall since cattle are more dispersed and are grazing green, actively growing grass.

Less feed is needed during winter because calving coincides with green grass availability. The home-raised hay saved in late-calving operations can be grazed or sold to improve a ranch's cash flow. Calves will typically be lighter, but lighter calves bring more dollars per pound than comparable heavier calves resulting in similar or often higher net incomes with later-born calves. Even if late-born calves are smaller at fall weaning, modifications in

handling and marketing can recover most of the differences in income if early- and late-born calves are compared at fall market time.

Marketing in fall is least desirable because more calves are for sale. Holding light-weight calves and feeding for a small weight gain over winter opens the option of marketing whenever the price tends to peak in late winter or retaining on grass through the next grazing season.





Later-born calves don't suffer from frozen ears or tails frequently seen in earlier-born calves. Where predation is a problem, late spring/early summer calving helps reduce calf losses because wildlife are having young at the same time. The result is a greater prey base (antelope and deer fawn, elk calves, rabbits, bird eggs and young birds), which helps reduce predation on beef calves.

Benefits of Early Calving

Early calving is beneficial if the producer is trying to meet a specific market and/or animal weight but requires more feed for the cow during winter and after calving.

Older calves typically weigh more at weaning, which may result in more gross income, but net income is what needs to be considered.

Older calves are generally bigger, thus, they can make better use of the green and actively growing grass available during early summer of their first year.

Late-calving Cows Incur Lower Maintenance Costs

A drawback of early calving is that greater quantities of high-quality supplemental feed and hay will be required during the winter and early spring to meet cows' increased nutritional needs resulting from calving and lactation. Winter is when an early-calving cow's nutritional need is greatest, but this is the time of lowest availability of high-quality standing crop forages for grazing. However, low-cost natural forages can meet the nutritional needs of late-calving cows during mid-pregnancy, as their period of highest nutritional need shifts to coincide with the availability of new spring/early summer grass.

Cows that calve in June can often be grazed on cured pasture forage all winter; therefore, these late-calving cows incur the lowest maintenance costs during the year.

Matching the cow's nutritional needs based on her level of production to a time when the nutritional quality of the forage resource available for grazing is at its highest is probably the easiest and most effective way of deciding "when to calve."

Jim Waggoner is a professor and the extension range livestock specialist, and Mike Smith is a professor and extension range specialist in the Department of Renewable Resources in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming. Waggoner can be reached at (307) 766-2365 or jwags@uwyo.edu. Smith can be reached at (307) 766-2337 or pearl@uwyo.edu.