

Spring Forward

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I recently read a good reminder that “No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn” from Hal Borland. This quote challenges us to reflect on two things: 1) where we have been and 2) our upcoming goals and the road ahead. I have been trying to do a lot more **FORWARD THINKING** lately when it comes to our extension programming. Likewise, this same thought applies to our operations this spring. As promised back in the fall, our key focus in this issue is related to considerations for spring-calving systems in Alabama. In whatever system you choose, there are distinct advantages and disadvantages. The following are some thoughts on calving season selection, and a comparison of fall- vs. spring-calving systems as we set our sights forward:

1) Consider the Forage Base

After reading several of my articles, I think you know that my heart lies in forage systems. However, beyond my personal affiliation for forages lies a simple truth: understanding your forage base is a key management decision that can influence your calving season decision. Nutrient demands of beef cattle are generally the greatest within the first 90 days after calving. Cows calving in the fall usually require more supplementation – mainly because this coincides with a time of low forage availability in the state. Winter feed costs can make up a **large** percentage of the total production costs in a cow-calf operation! One advantage of a spring-calving system is that we typically have cool-season forages that are ready to be grazed to meet the nutritional demands of our animals. These cows are also dry during the winter months – which mean they require a lower plane of nutrition during any period of supplementation. Estimating your winter costs of production and maximizing the use of grazed forages where possible can be a “maker or breaker” in the calving season decision toolbox.

2) Cow and Calf Performance - Expectations

Cow Performance – Calving in March or April means that cows are usually bred back during the hotter parts of the year (June and July) in spring-calving systems. Heat stress can affect fertility, with decreasing conception rates observed as the breeding period moves into July. This is more common in endophyte-infected tall fescue-based production systems, where the potential for tall fescue toxicosis and heat stress can reduce conception rates of spring-calving cows.

Calf Birth Weights – Spring-calving systems often have greater calf birth weights than herds that calve in the fall. Cows that are in mid- to late-gestation in the July/August time window generally have lighter birth weights than those gestating during the cooler months of the year. One thought behind this is that when cattle are gestating during the summer months, the blood flow of the animal shifts away some from the fetus and more towards heat dissipation. In other words, the blood is flowing closer to the surface of the animal to help reduce heat load and regulate body temperature. This reduction in blood flow may affect calf birth weights for fall-calving systems.

Calf Weaning Weights – Calves born in the spring tend to be lower weight at weaning than those born in the fall. This is because the majority of the growth period for these animals occurs during the summer months – a time of heat stress. Lactating animals grazing endophyte-infected tall fescue during this time period may experience decreased milk production, which can lead to decreased calf performance. In warm-season forage production systems, these forages are generally lower quality than cool-season forages, and spring-born calves are weaned at a time when warm-season forage nutritional value and quantity are declining.

3) Understanding Seasonal Markets

Fall-born calves are commonly marketed in the spring or early summer. This historically coincides with a time of seasonally higher prices due to a reduced supply of feeder calves. Spring-born calves are typically marketed in the fall before the beginning of winter. In recent years due to a declining supply of feeder calves, feeder calf market prices have remained high during the fall time period that has made spring calving more economically feasible. Preconditioning both spring- and fall-born calves increases potential pounds marketed, enhances feeder calf health, and profitability.

Implications for Your Operation: Certainly we have done a lot of comparing and contrasting in this article...there is no “one-size fits all” approach to selecting a calving season; however, we can reflect on some general guidelines to consider:

- When determining the best fit for your operation, it is most important to **first** have a defined calving season.
- The choice of ***when*** your calving season occurs is **site- and production system-specific** and **coupled with available labor and management**.
- Understanding your forage base, keeping good management records on animal performance, labor availability, and considering your marketing options are all **key factors** that will influence your choice. For more information on calving-season management decisions, contact your local Animal Science and Forage Regional Extension Agent.

We are getting ready to start a new article series in the next year called “Renewed and Revisited” where we will highlight hot topics that are on the rise again after many years. I think these will be greatly beneficial to you as we **THINK FORWARD** to improve our beef cattle production systems in Alabama.

*This is the fifth article in the Management Considerations for Changing Seasons. For more information, visit www.alabamabeefsystems.com, follow us on Twitter @ACESBeef, or on facebook.com/alabamabeefsystems! Check out www.secattleadvisor.com for regional beef cattle updates.