

Shortening the Calving Season

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Most cow/calf operators would agree that a calving season of 45 to 60 days is a desired goal. If you have achieved this goal, you can do nothing further to shorten the calving season. If your calving season extends beyond 120 days or even to year-round calving, however, shortening the calving season would give you some definite advantages.

Cow/calf producers should realize that the factor that exerts the greatest influence on calf weaning weight is the age of the calf when it is weaned. A calf can only gain so much each day, given the milk supplied by the cow and the nutrition acquired from available forage. It is, therefore, consistent that a calf born early in the calving season will be heavier at weaning than a calf born later in the season.

Data from Wyoming show that steer calves born in the first 21 days of the calving season are 29 pounds heavier at weaning than those born in the second 21-day period. Calves born 42 days into the calving season were 71 pounds lighter than those born in the first 21 days, and 42 pounds lighter than those born in the second 21 days of the calving season. Those born in subsequent 21-day calving periods can be as much as 100 pounds lighter than calves born early in the calving season.

Data collected on steers in Utah (Fig. 1) over a 10-year period substantiate the Wyoming findings. Data collected on heifers is similar (Fig. 2).

Another factor in favor of shortening the calving season is labor. The demands for labor are intensified during calving season on most operations. If the calving season is drawn out, conflicts for labor often result. A short calving season completed before other spring work begins can use available labor to its greatest advantage.

A shorter calving season will also prevent or at least reduce the number of calves that are born after the cows

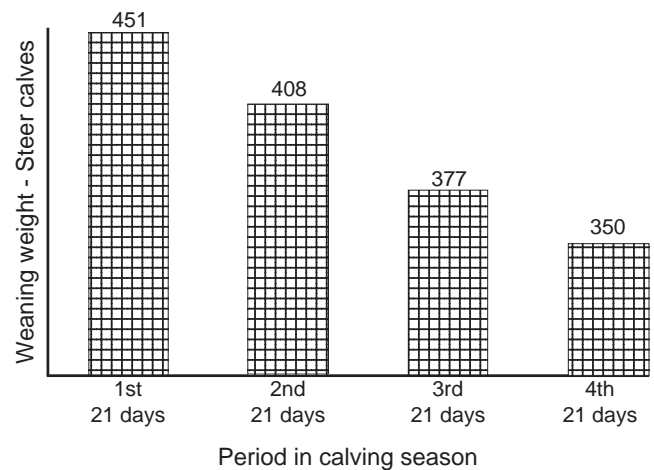


Fig. 1. Wyoming study of steer calf birth weights.

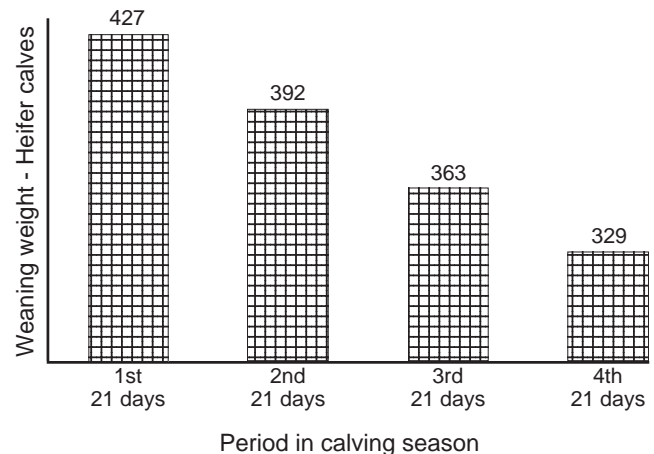


Fig. 2. Wyoming study of heifer calf birth weights.

are turned onto the range. These calves are a major problem since they are usually not branded or identified and have not been castrated or received any of the health treatments that they require.

Many producers feel that calves born later in the calving season will compensate for their late start during winter and the next summer. Research in Wyoming indicates that the heaviest calves at weaning time were also the heaviest at 18 months of age. Similarly, calves that were lighter at weaning time are still lighter at 18 months of age. Calves born early in the calving season are more desirable regardless of whether they are sold at weaning time or as yearlings.

Puberty in beef cattle is directly related to age and weight. Heifers that are older and heavier at weaning and at breeding will make more logical herd replacements. Younger and lighter heifers are likely to reach puberty later than older and heavier heifers. Heifers that reach puberty later in their first breeding season will calve later and return to breeding later as 2-year-olds. Because the interval from calving to return to estrus is about 80 to 90 days for heifers (20 to 30 days longer than for older cows), heifers that calve late in their first year will tend always to calve later.

Managers who want to shorten their calving season can accomplish this by breeding heifer replacements so they calve 2 to 3 weeks ahead of the main herd. Heifers

calving for the first time are subject to considerable stress. These first-calf heifers are still growing, so they have nutrient needs for growth, in addition to nutrient needs for milk production and rebreeding.

Milk production, growth of the young mother, and breeding performance may all be adversely affected by inadequate nutrition from parturition to rebreeding. Rebreeding is the first system to suffer under nutritional stress. If nutritional stress is severe, heifers may not breed at all, resulting in a high percentage of open heifers in the herd.

Cow/calf operators who breed first-calf heifers to calve 20 to 30 days ahead of the adult cow herd have the opportunity to calve these heifers first while the calving crew is fresh and able to give the heifers the needed attention. This system also gives the heifers additional time between calving and breeding, enabling them to cycle and be ready to rebreed on schedule with the mature herd.

Shortening the calving season has the following advantages:

1. Heavier, more uniform calves at weaning.
2. Better use of available labor.
3. Better opportunity to select for fertility in the cow herd.
4. Greater income.

