

# LOW COST COW/CALF PROGRAM

## *The Bulletin For Alumni Of The School*

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### **Summer Calving**

We've devoted a large portion of our life to preaching about the attributes of summer calving. It is difficult to comprehend why ranchers don't see the advantages of calving when the sun is shining and the grass is green. Why isn't a low-input, profit-driven program the most desirable for all? I do not know of any rancher who does not want to make a profit. If all ranchers desire to be profitable, why then isn't profitability the number-one goal? It probably is but simply not stated as such. There are two ways to increase profits: to produce more with concomitant increase in costs or to reduce expenses. The vast majority of ranchers strive for ever-higher levels of production. This usually culminates in weaning weights. Only a handful of ranchers truly can say that their herds can survive and produce, off the land only. The majority harbor large cows that (birth large calves) produce beau-coups of milk, all of which results in weaning large calves. Solely, the land can support none of this. It is understandable that ranchers are production oriented. They are being bombarded continuously with advice about how to increase production by those in the "know." What nutritionist, in his right mind, is going to recommend a supplement that will result in cattle losing weight? Is there a geneticist who writes about the proper combination of breeds X, Y and Z that will result in smaller cows and calves? (The Angus folks recently have addressed this size problem, which is a positive.) Have you ever seen an advertisement for a drug or feed additive that does not suggest heavier weaning weights?

### **Underlying Cause**

Thousands of ranchers have endured the rigors of Dave Pratt's Ranching for Profit School<sup>1</sup> and are in line to remain profitable through an entire cattle-price cycle. Still more have heard about the School and heard just enough to know that their current practices are going to get ripped. The calculation of gross margin sends fear through their (and their tax accountant's)

calculators. We travel throughout North America, giving speeches and teaching Schools about summer calving and low-input ranching. The most common response is "it won't work here." In response, we make comments and ask questions as well. One rancher told us about his 100+% calf crop. How do you figure? Is that based on the number of calves born, relative to the number of females exposed? No! We palpate (following breeding) and cull all of the opens as recommended. We then base calving rate on the cows that were pregnant and remained in the herd. Occasional twinning can give us something better than a 100% calving rate. We prize the twins. We found this to be common in one entire state. We've asked about the cost of feeding hay in order to make winter calving possible. We generally get two answers: that's the way the university does it and it costs us very little. "We take good care of our equipment so it is operative yet fully depreciated. My wife does the swathing and I do the bailing. The kids gather bales on the weekend." If haying costs so little, then make it a profit center or second enterprise and go to the bank when you sell the hay. You can forget the cows. We also hear, "we would like to attend your School but we can't be away from our day jobs." Or, "we are calving right now and must be home." Profits commonly are calculated on return per cow; therefore, big is better. When gross product is calculated on a unit of land basis, the world goes from flat to round. Of course, you can't calve here in the summer - it's just too hot. And **here** is even in the midwestern US. We need to inform our alums near McAllen, TX and LaBelle, FL that *'what they are doing is the impossible.'* Things are a bit different with the cool-season grasses of central and northern California. The grass is green in Jan. but seldom is there sufficient quantity. The previous year's stockpiled forage is still relied upon. Usually by Feb. the new world opens up. High-quality feed is available until mid June, when all becomes toast. Conventional and University herds calve in Nov., with a lot of hay feeding. Our clients, past and present, are calving in April with cows conditioned off the lush forage. The cows

are fat and the neighbors laugh but the fat cows got that way w/o the expense of feeding hay. Those who have fungus in their forage may have difficulty calving in the heat of summer. Endophyte-infected fescue often requires a work-a-round. Some alleviate the problem with grazing management. Others move calving to a later date, starting around Sep. 15. By then, the humidity and nighttime temperatures have broken and the feverous cattle are more comfortable.

### **Summer Breeding**

If you like winter calving, you've gotta love summer breeding. By nature, our beef herds are the most sexually active at the time of the equinoxes - or when the sun is directly over the equator. In the northern hemisphere we key in on the autumnal equinox, which is about Sept. 23. May-through-July breeding ignores this opportunity. The justification for winter calving is heavy weaning weights in the fall. To help assure this goal, there must be careful sire selection. Accompanying the high cost of winter calving is the high price paid for bulls. Bulls with fat-insulated scrotums from grain-fed/bull-testing facilities are highly prized. Fertility tests of these bulls (that are about to go to work) are as good as any. But what is the sperm count and viability after having worked for a week or two? To overcome any infertility problems, simply reduce the cow-to-bull ratio. Universities (that calve in the winter and breed in the summer) ratio 20 to 25 cows per bull. This bull cost is unaffordable for the commercial producer. How many university herds run in such rough country that necessitates so many bulls?

### **Schools In 2007**

Portage, MB Jan 31 – Feb 3  
El Reno, OK March 6 - 9  
Lamar, CO March 12 – 15  
Preeceville, SK June 24 - 27

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ranchmanagement.com>