



Transitioning to a Tighter Calving Window

As spring calving approaches, it gives cattle managers the opportunity to evaluate the current status of the calving window in terms of length and distribution. Extending the breeding season, therefore the calving season often increase herd pregnancy rates, however it comes at a price. First one must determine if an extended calving season poses an issue to the success of the operation. Producers will likely see obvious effects of this management style including, but not limited to; varying calf weights and age at weaning, late bred cows, and mismatched cow nutritional needs to available resources. Having such large variability in the calving distribution could have huge economic impacts on the producer. To illustrate the disadvantage of late born calves, consider the following example. A calf born 90 days prior to another calf has the potential to be 180 lbs heavier at weaning than the late born calf assuming a 2 lb per day gain. This weight advantage makes the earlier born calf more valuable, when the dams likely had similar maintenance costs over the course of a year. Transitioning cows to calve earlier in the calving season in a tighter window requires stricter management and discipline pulling bulls on time, but it could lead to several benefits.

Benefits of an appropriate calving season:

- A more uniform calf crop—as to be expected calves born around the same time are likely to be similar in weight, and therefore more marketable.
• Matching nutritional needs to feed resources— in many management systems it is ideal to match feed resources to nutritional needs of the cattle. When the cowherd is in different phases of gestation, lactation etc. it becomes more difficult to match resources to cow needs. Inefficiency would include supplying a feed source to the cowherd that is exceeding some cows' needs and falling short on others.
• Identifying reproductively unsound cattle more easily—with a defined breeding and calving season, it would be easier to identify open cows at fall pregnancy checks to be culled compared to cows that were bred late and in early gestation. A more defined breeding season also makes it much more

- encouraging to cull an open cow versus a late bred cow.
• Improved herd management—All factors combined, a more defined calving window requires a more structured schedule encouraging producers to become more organized in other areas of management. This may include branding, vaccinations, deworming, weaning, and pregnancy checking.

Generally there are two methods to shorten the calving window; cutting off the breeding season to 90 days (or the desired length of the calving season) and retaining non-pregnant cows to rebreed on time the next year, and shortening the breeding season gradually over several years. While the first method resolves the extended calving period very quickly, it includes holding over cows for an additional year while they are unproductive. Table 1 illustrates an example of converting an extended calving season to a 90-day season over the course of three years. This example gives dates of when breeding should start and end, and when calving begins and ends for both heifers and cows. The included dates are just a scenario and obviously will not be ideal for every producer depending on weather, calving resources, and other activities needing planned around. Once transitioned, the cowherd is more likely to calve in the desired window as they will be given adequate time to calve and rebreed if reproductively sound.

In many cases, tightening the calving season cannot be accomplished in one year alone if a big correction needs to be made. Making small improvements pulling bulls on a yearly basis will slowly improve the calving season length and provide the benefits mentioned previously. More disciplined management and a stricter calendar can provide benefits beyond a tighter calving season that should be explored.

For more information on calving season, please visit or call the Cheyenne County Extension Office at (785)332-3171.

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Table 1. An example of a 3-year plan for converting a year round calving program to a 90-day calving season

Table with 5 columns: Year, Breeding starts (Heifers, Cows), Breeding Ends (Heifers, Cows), Calving Begins (Heifers, Cows), and Calving Ends (Heifers, Cows). Rows show data for Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3.

Adapted from Mullenix, K., Elmore, M., Rodnig, S. (2020). Transitioning to a Defined Calving Season. Alabama Cooperative Extension System