

LIVESTOCK

Regional ranchers should reconsider default fall-calving

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When I was in the Texas Christian University Ranch Management Program, long-time program director John Merrill referred to the unchanging

absolutes in cow-calf production as “hitching posts.”

Hitching Post One (HP1)

A cow's primary purpose is to bring a live calf to the weaning pen every 365 days. It is more economically important than the calf's weaning weight or subsequent performance. The producer must provide the right environment for the cow to meet that expectation, which includes providing adequate nutrition, a comprehensive herd health program and bull management. In my experience, inadequate nutrition is the most common cause of failure in reproductive performance.

Hitching Post Two (HP2)

A thin or underfed cow will not rebreed until she is in adequate body condition and/or on a nutrition plan that meets her nutritional needs.

Hitching Post Three (HP3)

Grazing is the most economical means of providing a cow's nutritional needs. The less supplemental feed and hay needed, the more potential for profit in the long-run.



Hitching Post Four (HP4)

The first three hitching posts are intricately linked with a fourth. A cow's nutritional requirements vary during the year and are driven mainly by her reproduction stage, from her lowest needs after weaning and in mid-gestation to her highest needs after calving when she reaches peak lactation. A cow's protein needs likely double and energy needs can increase one-and-a-half times between these two periods.

An operation is most successful when it matches the cows' nutritional needs to the quality and quantity of the forage base through appropriate stocking rate and grazing management. The interconnectivity and applicability of these “hitching posts” apply to all operations, regardless of calving season.

Most of the producers I've worked

with calve in the spring. They understand the “hitching posts” and that the warm-season perennial forage base in the Southern Great Plains fits that timing best (HP3). Despite the potential for lower conception rates in the heat of summer and the traditional decline in calf prices at weaning in the fall, these producers maintain profitability primarily by minimizing winter feed costs (HP4). They also manage calf marketing to mitigate the low, seasonal calf prices.

Fall-calving producers fall into one of two scenarios. First are those who deliberately and successfully manage for a fall-calving herd. Often, they are top-level, low-cost, efficient producers with warm-season forages, or they have a cool-season perennial forage base that reduces winter feed costs for a lactating cow (HP4). These producers

capitalize on the several advantages to fall-calving. Fall-born calves are old enough to take advantage of the high-quality forage flush from early spring to weaning in early summer and usually wean heavier. A second advantage is the price for weaned calves is historically higher in early summer than in the fall for spring-born calves.

Then, there are producers who spring-calve for all the right reasons but manage a fall-calving herd to slide in open cows. Historically, the advice has been to sell open cows, which I usually still recommend. There are value-added practices to marketing cull cows that should be considered. Even when the economics support giving an open cow another chance to breed versus replacing her, there's rarely any consideration given to the possibility she will fail to breed again. If a cow is open due to poor management, sliding her to a fall-calving herd won't make a difference until management improves. If the producer did his/her part, the cow could be too big or produce too much milk or she could simply be infertile. Regardless, if she misses once she gives up 15 to 20 percent of her lifetime production potential, and it'll take up to three of her contemporaries to pay her way. Give careful consideration to the economics of a default fall-calving herd. ■