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Cooperative Extension, South Dakota State University

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Cooperative Extension Service



Calving 2-Year-Olds

Calving 2-Year-Olds

Spring is the most popular calving season in South Dakota. Therefore, each beef producer must decide whether to calve his heifers at approximately 24 or 36 months of age.

If 2-year-olds were calved successfully, the obvious positive result would be 1 additional year of productivity for each cow, a larger percentage of the total herd in production, and the need of fewer replacement heifers to maintain cow numbers.

There have been some negative results in calving 2-year-olds. Some most commonly mentioned by ranchers who have attempted it are: larger death loss, permanent stunting, failure of heifers to rebreed, and extra labor required at calving time.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES

These negative results are serious, however, the chances of their occurrence may be greatly reduced by following a few suggested practices:

1. Systematic Selection and Breeding Program.

It is necessary that the rancher keep approximately one-third of the heifer calves each year as replacement stock to maintain cow numbers. These replacement heifers should be selected on the basis of conformation and size for age. Information on ancestors would also help. The ideal "beef type" includes plenty of width and depth. Possibly emphasis should also be placed on the size (length and depth) of the pelvic region.

Size for age is a very important selection criteria. This trait is partially heritable and can be expected to be transmitted in part to the offspring. Research has shown a correlation between rate of gain and feed efficiency. Therefore, one may expect the faster gaining heifers to require less feed per pound of gain than the slower gaining heifers. One may also expect less calving troubles from the larger heifers.

A system of herd records is a must in order to accurately measure size for age. In general, the selection of a heifer out of a dam with a record of calving troubles should be avoided.

The bull that is used for breeding the heifers has some effect on the size and shape of the offspring. Therefore, care should be taken to prevent yearling heifers from being bred to a bull with a large head, rough shoulders, and excessive bone.

2. Adequate Nutrition.

Heifers that are to be bred as yearlings should weigh at least 425 pounds at weaning and 675 pounds at breeding time. This means that heifers should gain a minimum of 1 pound per day during the first winter. South Dakota State College experiments indicate that this

can be accomplished with sufficient amounts of high quality alfalfa hay. However, small amounts of grain and protein supplements may be necessary, depending on such factors as breeding, weaning weight, weather, shelter, and quality of roughage.

Heifers should grow at a rate after breeding that will bring them to 850 to 950 pounds 3 months prior to calving time. Very little growth is expected during the last 3 months of the gestation, since most of the nutrients will be utilized by the growth of the fetus.

The necessary growth rate can usually be attained with good pasture and ample amounts of high quality roughage. The "eye of the master herdsman" can determine if concentrates or commercial supplements are necessary to meet the above-mentioned goals.

As a general rule, heifers should receive .8 pound of digestible protein per day from weaning until calving. This will normally be received from either good green pasture, 7 pounds of alfalfa hay, 2 pounds of 40% protein supplement, or 2½ pounds of 32% protein supplement. If the protein is furnished through protein supplement, it would be good insurance to include vitamin A. Mineral and salt should be fed free choice.

Take care to see that the heifers will receive a sufficient amount of high quality feed after calving also. The lactation period is very critical and requires good nutrition to maintain the heifer. Early weaning is recommended if the heifers fail to maintain reasonable condition.

3. Sound Management.

Observe 2-year-old heifers closely during their calving period. Some 2-year-olds will require timely assistance during parturition.

By Delwyn Dearborn, Assistant Extension Livestock Specialist

Heifers to be calved as 2-year-olds should not be turned in with the cow herd until after they have had their first calf. In fact, heifers should receive additional feed during the third winter if they are in a rundown condition. Some cattlemen have found that wintering yearlings and 2-year-olds together, separate from the cow herd, works very well. The necessity of higher quality feed and closer observation requires that replacement heifers be kept separate.

Disease problems are usually minor with healthy growing beef heifers. However, certain precautions should be taken. Calfhood vaccinate all replacement heifers for brucellosis between 4 and 8 months of age.

Bloat, shipping fever, pneumonia, and scours, as well as other less common ailments, require that the heifers be closely observed by the herdsman. There is no cure for bloat as yet. Sell chronic bloaters. Bloat or scours may be due to the ration. Shipping fever and pneumonia are most common when the heifers are going through a severe stress period. Special care should be taken at times such as weaning to provide an ideal environment.

SUCCESS DEPENDS ON VARIOUS FACTORS

Many beef producers will improve their profits by calving 2-year-olds. Others will encounter numerous problems. The success of the practice depends on the breeding, feeding, and management practices employed by the herdsman.

The following information is from the El Reno, Oklahoma, Experimental Station:

Production Records at 12 Years for Cows that Calved First as 2- and 3-Year-Olds

Age at first calving	2-year-olds	3-year-olds
No. cows start of experiment		
(Oct. 1948)	60	60
No. cows remaining		
April 14, 1960	37	42
Weight changes 1948-1960		
Initial weight (10-28-48)	476	471
First year (4-18-49)	533	523
Second year (4-25-50)	749	798
Third year (4-21-51)	758	838
Fourth year (4-15-52)	868	920
Fifth year (4-10-53)	940	984
Twelfth year (4-14-60)	980	1,014
No. times calved	10	9
No. possible calvings	532	480
No. calves weaned	484	422
% calf crop weaned	91.0	87.9
No. calves weaned per cow	9.10	7.91
Av. weaning weights	476	487
Total lbs. calf weaned	230,384	205,514
Value @ \$25 per cwt., \$	57,590.00	51,378.50
Av. calving date	3/11	3/9
Cow cost per cwt. calf weaned \$	9.77	10.90

A combination of all costs such as land, feed, equipment, interest, and taxes for each cow represents a sizable investment. This investment demands "know how" and "care" on the part of the herdsman to make it pay dividends.