

Black Ink Calving Assets

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Most North American cowherds calve in the “spring,” very broadly defined as January to May because folks contending with wind chill don’t want to admit they calve in the winter. Spring continues for the first three weeks of June, but we tend to

call that summer calving. And of course, millions of fall-born calves will soon face weaning.

Whenever, wherever, each calving season brings new beginnings. The calves show themselves, fortunately almost always already on the ground. That’s more likely if they are the result of planned matings. In groups of bred heifers, planning should have taken calving ease into account.

Some producers’ main plan is to get the calf puller ready because every third or fourth heifer always needs assistance. Many heifers calve in February and March because that gets it done before fieldwork. With feelings of dread, we get up twice every night to check them. If we ignore the alarm clock, big problems may turn up when that sun rises.

The odds are astronomically in favor of that sun appearing to rise in the east every morning. But we don’t have to accept everything else; the fact that something does not change doesn’t mean it cannot change. A focused effort to inject uniformity and calving ease can pay off in short order.

As calves from both the heifers and cows are tagged and recorded, they should become part of a master plan. They are assets, not only on your ledger, but for the whole beef industry.

Are they at risk of becoming “toxic assets” like the mortgages in the bank’s financial sick pen?

Consider those genetics again. Bull and replacement heifer selection, along with cow culling, can adapt a herd to thrive on your resources and management style. A low-input program does not meet well with high-input genetics, and lines meant for a harsh, austere range are poorly matched with a lush environment.

In terms of their potential for uniformity, growth and beef quality, do you know what these calves can be? If you don’t really know, you could be missing some opportunities to add value in managing the herd beyond getting live calves.

Part-time producers with very small herds can often find expert advice from an Extension beef specialist, their bull supplier or a friendly neighbor with a larger and apparently well-managed herd. Everybody can also find worthwhile ideas online.

Very large producers may not even read this far, but volume alone does not prove superiority of herd management. In fact, they may be at a disadvantage in the time and labor they devote to managing individual cattle in an extensive herd. On the other hand, millions of excellent calves are produced from large herds where managers have made quality beef a profitable priority.

Regardless of herd size, health and nutrition of the calves should be paramount from now on, through a complete mineral, vaccination and low-stress weaning program. Millions of calves get to their weaning date only by the passage of time, and whether directly placed or via auction markets, they arrive in feedlots at great risk of becoming toxic assets.

Chronics in sick pens are waiting to recover a semblance of health, go back out to grass for a while or continue the path toward a finished harvest, but many will be extremely low value or even condemned. They will certainly kill profitability.

Ironically, some who produce high-risk calves hide feedlots for lack of sharing information, or if they hear about the wreck, they pretend it wasn’t caused by anything they did or didn’t do.

Setting your calves up for success builds bridges with the feeding sector and makes yard managers receptive to sharing data even without retained ownership. And the data means more when you know the calves have been given every chance to succeed. Δ

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