

## **A PRODUCER'S EXPERIENCE ON MOVING CALVING DATE**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

I grew up on a purebred operation, where we did everything the hard way. If it involved more labor, more overhead, and more inputs we did it that way. Calving season was of course the most labor intensive, coldest time of the year. We calved every cow through the barn and watched them around the clock. Each calf was weighed, tagged, vaccinated at birth, and not to mention probably nursed. Now we calve around 2,500 commercial cows and sometimes we check them, but most of the time we don't even see the calves until branding time.

### **DECISION TO CHANGE**

When I came home from college, my father and I started a ranch management business called McCarty Ranching LLC, with the idea in mind to manage ranches for absentee owners. We acquired a contract to manage a ranch close to my home town called the Two Dot Ranch. It is a large cow/calf operation and soon we learned we were going to be unable to continue in the family purebred operation and manage outside ranches. We dispersed the purebred cows in November of 1996. Then in December of 2000 an opportunity to trade our family ranch for a larger ranch in the same area came up. We acquired part of the old Dessert Ranch in Cody. When we purchased the ranch from the Mormon Church we purchased the cow herd with it.

During that time Burke Teichert was managing that ranch, he informed me that if I was smart we would continue to operate the ranch and manage the cows as a summer time calving herd, because it had worked so well for them. So we did just that, and for the next three years I watched those cows, comparing them and our operation costs to the March calving cow herd I was managing at the Two Dot Ranch. Our hay cost on our family cows was zero, and they remained body condition score 5 or better year around. Meanwhile I was feeding hay to the Two Dot cows all winter long and had thin cows. We finally began to discuss the idea of moving the calving season for the Two Dot cow herd to summer time as well.

This decision although it appeared to be an easy obvious one to make did take a lot of planning and preparation. It was not as easy as simply holding the bulls off the cows for another 75 days. We had to make sure our BLM permits could be adjusted for later season grazing on our winter grass, as well as adjusting some grazing rotations on our deeded ground. It also took some thought as to the new marketing windows that open with summer calving. After several cussing and discussing sessions the decision was made to move from March and April calving to June and July calving.

## BENEFITS EXPERIENCED

Obviously the biggest benefit is no more riding around in a storm picking up froze down calves. Well, I do not know if that is the biggest benefit, but along those same lines we no longer have a scour problem. I can remember roping and doctoring sometimes 20 to 40 calves a day with scours on the feed line. Last year, I bought one box of scour pills and I still have half the box left. Now with calving on green grass in big country we no longer even vaccinate the cows with Scour Guard, a savings of \$.90 per head.

Along the same lines of no more cold frozen, scoured calves we now wean 2.07% more calves than with winter calving. During my ten years managing the Two Dot Ranch the first eight years with winter calving we averaged a 91.78% weaned calf crop, now with summer calving for the last two years we averaged 93.85% weaned calf crop. That has translated for us into 30 more weaned marketable calves.

It is hard to weigh out which benefit has helped the most, but feed cost is definitely up there. When we calved in the winter in order to meet the demands for a February calving cow, we were feeding from February 1 to May 15. On an average winter we fed 1.5 ton per cow. With summer calving we feed from April 1 until grass green up around May 15 that has averaged 980# per cow per year. At a hay cost of \$75 per ton this has meant a savings of \$75.75 per cow. In addition we are no longer on the hay market each year buying additional hay, because now with the shortened feeding season from 104 days to 45 days, the ranch produces enough hay to support the cows.

With the decrease in nutritional demands on a summer time calving cow we now only feed protein supplement for 90 days in the winter January 1 to April 1. With winter calving we had to feed a protein supplement starting November 1 to April 1. That was 120 days of throwing block out of the back of a pickup. This has resulted in a savings of \$6.00 per head protein cost. Along those same lines we now only feed mineral during the crucial times the cow needs it. We have decreased our mineral consumption from 69 pounds per cow per year to 50 pounds per cow per year. This has meant a \$3.80 per cow savings.

As I sat down to figure all this out one of the most interesting statistics I realized was the weight per day of age change in the calves. When we winter calved we weaned at 215 days of age for a weight per day of age of 1.83 pounds. Now with weaning the calves at 135 days old our weight per day of age has gone up to 2.76 pounds. This is an increase of almost a pound per day on calves that are 80 days younger. This has also means the cows are supporting a calf for 80 less days than before.

Our weaning weights have changed very little, but our gross income per calf has changed significantly. With our winter calving program we averaged over eight years a 480 pound weaned calf, with our summer calving program we have averaged a 415 pound weaned calf. Using this year prices we averaged \$60 more per head for the lighter younger calf than we would have for a heavier older calf. These younger lighter calves have also opened up much more marketing windows than before. We now have the option to keep the

calves over as yearlings or sell off the cow. Where with winter calved calves they were to big too make grass cattle in the spring.

Another very important economical statistic that stands out is our breed back. With winter calving we had a 93% breed up. Moving to summer calving we increased our breed up to 96%. This has resulted for us in 44 more bred cows per year than before, if you consider a bred cow is worth \$400 more than an open cow on average this has meant a \$17,600 savings per year or \$12.04 per cow.

### THE DRAWBACKS

One of the big things I heard before we moved our calving season to summer time was “The biggest benefit is reduced labor”. Well I can not see where that has happened for us. Yes we no longer have to saddle up in the 20 degree below zero weather to check calving cows, but we now brand calves for 30 days instead of 5. Now with calving in June the cows are turned out in large pastures sometimes in excess of 15,000 acres. Making it impossible to gather a pasture and brand all the calves in a day. Now we brand as we change pastures creating more labor, because we now have to be very careful moving young calves and staying paired up. Sometimes we only brand 30 or 40 in a day, we just get as many pairs as we can handle and change pastures with them branding through the gate. This has transferred the decrease in labor from calving to branding. Also now branding comes at the same time as first cutting hay, so we are plenty busy the month of July at our house.

### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, I can without a doubt, tell you the benefits out weigh the drawbacks. We have decreased our costs to run a cow close to \$160 a year. I do not know that summer time calving fits every operation, one must have the winter grazing available. But I do know we have sure helped the bottom line in our operation, and I no longer feel as though we do every thing the hard way.

