



A NEWSLETTER OF DAKOTALAND FEEDS

## Fall Calving

There are some people in the industry advocating for more producers to start fall calving with the goal of hitting a different market or having fat cattle ready at a different time of year. Calving in the fall often means you have light calves to sell to go to grass in May and that those calves will be ready for harvest at a time when live cattle prices are generally higher. But, like most things, there are positives and negatives associated with it. Before you turn the bulls out, there are some things that you should consider.

Fall calving means different things to different people. There is a difference in calving in August vs. November. The shelter required could differ substantially depending on if you are calving in the heat and need shade or if there is an early snow storm that you need to protect newborn calves from. Fall calving can be relatively easy, since the September weather is usually mild and cows generally require less intense watching and assistance. These fall calves that don't have much contact with people can also be more difficult to handle.

The biggest consideration for fall calving is how much feed you are going to need. It takes a lot of feed to get a lactating cow through the winter. With spring calving herds, nutrient requirements are the lowest in the winter months allowing us to graze corn stalks or other low quality forage with low amounts of supplementation. That is definitely not the case with fall calvers. You are going to need a lot of high quality feed to get a pair through the winter. Remember that a cow can have maintenance requirements that increase 20% or more in cold, wet, and windy weather. When you add the requirements for lactation on top of that, you are really asking a lot of that cow.

Calves are going to need to eat, too. Creep feed is almost a necessity when fall calving, or you must make sure you have adequate bunk space for a cow and calf. If you plan on the calves eating with the cows, it is best practice to have at least 24" or more of bunk space per cow. The ration you are feeding the cows is likely to be short on protein for what a young growing calf would need. We would want to supply around 10-11% protein for a mature cow in peak lactation. Young calves should have 14% protein or more.

Breeding season for fall calvers is sometime between November 1st and February 1st. With South Dakota weather, storms and cold may make the bull less interested in breeding cows and more interested in finding a spot out of the wind and snow. Then, it is another 21 days before the cows come back into estrus. Some winters are better than others as far as weather goes, but some bulls may do a better job getting cows bred in the winter months than others, as well.

Speaking of bulls, if you have both a spring and fall calving herd, you can make further use of your bull power. During the nine months (or more) per year that your bulls aren't working, they are often busy fighting or breaking things. Utilizing them twice a year means you can keep them out of trouble and decrease your cost per pregnancy because they will have a chance to breed twice as many cows per year.

Having fall and spring calvers can lead to a potential circle of infertility if you aren't careful. If you continuously move open cows from one season to the next, you could lose track of when she last calved. Starting a fall calving herd is more successful if you don't just start it with open cows from the spring. If you use those open cows, you are already starting with a sub-fertile female. Given the challenges breeding in the winter, it would probably serve you better to hold some cattle for fall breeding or to buy some bred fall calving cows to maintain a high level of fertility in a fall calving herd.

### In a Nutshell:

- **Fall calving can have positives and negatives.**
- **Consider what a fall calving window means to you.**
- **Lactating cows need more feed in the winter.**
- **Plan on feeding the calf, too.**
- **Weather during breeding season can be a challenge.**
- **Bull cost can be spread over more cows.**
- **Be careful to avoid a circle of infertility.**
- **Timing to weaning fall calves can be more difficult.**

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When to wean fall calves can also be debated. The earlier you wean the calves, the sooner you drop the nutrient requirements of the cow. In some years, there may be a big advantage to weaning those calves earlier so you can get by with some rougher feed. In others, you may want to hold off on weaning to get more than a couple of days when the weather is decent so you aren't weaning calves into a blizzard.

After living in Kansas while I was going to school, it made perfect sense to me why someone there would want to have fall calving cows. They don't get substantial amounts of snow, so calving isn't nearly as difficult and unpredictable as it is in South Dakota or North Dakota. Then, they have calves that are ready to market in the months when prices are normally higher, both as light feeders and as finished cattle. It's a win-win. But, being a few hundred miles north makes a big difference in our climate, so we have a little more to consider when thinking about fall calving.

*Roxanne Knock, PhD*

### ***What do you need to be thinking about this time of year?***

- Remember to HEAT TAPE lines on liquid systems—this keeps the line fluid.
- Get 30-13 tubs or 38-20 Hi E tubs and salt for grazing corn stalks.
- Talk to your vet about getting a VFD prior to weaning if you plan to use Aureomycin.
- Administer booster vaccinations and implant your calves.
- Pregnancy check cows and cull opens or problem cows.
- Get mineral out to the cattle since dormant forages are deficient in many trace minerals.
- Talk to your veterinarian about ultrasounding or pregnancy checking your replacement heifers.
- Inventory your projected feed resources and project your winter feed needs so you can plan accordingly.

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