



You can rush quality

Once a cow is pregnant, the role of genetic selection is finished. Now it's up to nature and management to determine if the calf will live up to its potential.

Cow nutrition and weather play leading roles in the months before calving, but gestation is a fixed term. Given the breeding date, you can look up when the calf is due. After it hits the ground, however, management can vary the milestones.

You can take your time, balancing use of resources with the need for sales revenue and beef quality. A century ago, if you didn't like the market for two-year-olds, they often became threes. Today, we know that the longer you take to raise a calf to a finished endpoint, the more can go wrong. Younger finished cattle may also open doors to a billion-dollar export market.

Weaning can profitably take place at less than 90 days of age to nearly a year in some herds. Most ranchers aim for an industry standard of about seven months, but there is a trend toward earlier weaning. Researchers have found weaning at less than five months allows calves to adjust while under the protection of maternal antibodies. It also lets spring calvers regain condition before winter, and makes feeding more efficient for all.

Ohio and Illinois studies show calves that start on a grain-based diet earlier in life develop the type of rumen bacteria more likely to let each potential fleck of marbling bloom within muscle tissues. That's compared to calves that remain on a forage-based diet until they are yearlings. Nebraska trials indicate beef from yearlings tends to be tougher, too.

Up to 70% of the feed cattle consume goes to body maintenance—and that’s every day. No wonder more producers see greater efficiency in resource use to aim for harvest of finished cattle at 13 to 14 months rather than placement on feed at 16 to 18 months. As interest rates inch higher, the economic reasons for faster finishing grow.

Producers who wean early do not generally sell lighter calves. Rather, they retain ownership and maintain the plain of nutrition as calves get used to independent life. Then they step up to higher daily gains. Any setbacks to slow-grow or maintenance diets risk lower beef quality, especially on calves with growth implants. Given the right combination of genetics and nutrition, implants are not harmful to beef quality, but strategy is important.

Tradition rules much of cattle country, partly because of the “disconnect” between cow-calf, stocker, feedlot and packer segments. Land and resource control is another factor. It’s easy to stick with a program of grazing calves that should be in a feedlot because a landlord only allows yearlings.

Indeed, there is a widespread bias among non-farm landlords. What their fathers told them is true: it is easier to deal with yearlings. Cow-calf pairs require a longer season and may graze less evenly. Bulls can cause problems with fences and neighboring herds.

However, producers who see merit in the calf-fed route should begin negotiations to evolve new grazing plans with such landlords. Heifers could be an option, or the pasture could be part of a larger pasture rotation of cow-calf pairs, resulting in fewer grazing days and the same income as yearlings provided.

The trend toward calf-fed beef may gradually affect supply and demand on the range. Grass pastures are often hard to find because of long-term relationships, but if yearlings continue to lose the quality edge, they will become less profitable, and then, less numerous. A few custom graziers have already begun to offer contracts with cow-calf pairs as a grass-harvesting alternative to yearlings.

While the role of genetic selection ends at conception, expression and evaluation of calf genetics and those of the cow are keys to adapting any herd to a calf-fed program. Observation and measurement may lead to different selection decisions down the road. Producers may add to their balanced trait criteria with rapid early growth and the ability to deposit marbling at an early age.

Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at what's on your grill. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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