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WHY DID WE CHANGE TO JUNE CALVING?

Paul D. Redd
Paradox, Colorado

Background note:

Paul Redd runs 1200 cows on 250,000 acres of public and private land on the Colorado Utah border. Half the cows produce registered bulls and heifers for the annual (April) bull sale. Half the cows are commercial cows. All the cows winter on the desert and summer in the mountains.

WHY DID WE CHANGE TO JUNE CALVING?

We finally admitted we were violating our own principles, for 50 years we have said:

We believe it makes good cow sense to:

1- Use yearling bulls
2- Sell the old bull
3- Buy only top end performance bulls
4- Buy the best bulls you can find.
5- Take advantage of hybrid vigor
6- Don't buy fat bulls
7- **Make Mother Nature your partner. Build a cow herd adapted to work efficiently in your country (your environment**). Keep those good producing cows that wean a good calf every year. Cull the cows that don't pull their weight.
8- Select four good feet and legs
9- Using too few bulls is a false economy
10- Keep "Mama Cow" maternal first
11- Produce what the beef consumer wants: tender, tasty, lean beef

Sure, we were using Mother Nature to help us find the best producing cows by culling all those that did not wean a calf each year. At the same time, we were ignoring the high cost of forcing an arbitrary calving date. We wanted March/April calves. The "green" started sometime in March, but there wasn't enough to get a mouthful until May. Cows were calving when there was not enough quality forage to support her and her new calf. We knew that. So for 40+ years we were forever trying various supplements and/or substitutes for the range. Those supplements added $50 to $150 per cow per winter (7 months).

And we received a great deal of help from our friends in the Extension Service and Research stations throughout the west. Dr Wiltbank established some very valuable bench marks and tools to help us in our fight with Mother Nature. The Breeding Condition Score helped us identify where our cows needed to be if they were to reproduce efficiently. And these scores

were applied and miss-applied to supplement management. But, finally, Dr. Wiltbank suggested changing the calving season to match range condition to the cow needs. After all these years of striving to get the cow herd to calve in 60 days in March and April, it was heresy to suggest we should calve in June. June is LATE, way too late! We have culled good cows that have slipped into calving late, calving in May, let alone June. Many of those cull cows go on to be extraordinary cows in someone else's herd where they were given adequate nutrition

Now, after all we have been through to keep cows calving on time in March, to purposely cause our cows to delay calving until June, what were we thinking? Neighbor, Joe Taylor's reaction: "Paul has gone and shot himself in the foot". And he was right if we were to try to go back to March calving. It appeared to be a real gamble. There was no going back.

SO, WHY DID WE CHANGE TO JUNE CALVING?

1- To lower costs
- less supplemental feed
- less labor (cowboy, cow pony, miles on pickup & trailer)

2- Less stress: on the cows & on the cowboys
3- More markets, more options of what and when to sell

Over the years we have used a variety of winter range supplements. CSM (cottonseed meal) and salt, liquid molasses based feeds, protein blocks, various loose mixes of grain protein and salt. In the past four years our cows have received only a mineral laced with urea.

The minerals used were determined by using feed analysis of range forage samples taken each month for two years. It seems to be working. Conditions differ from year to year. In wet winters they do very well, in dry cold winters they get by, but that is okay, they can afford to loose some weight during the winter because they will regain the weight in the spring. Just to clarify for you purebred breeders, when we say spring we mean March, April and May; not January and February.

This last spring, the Extension Service put on a great one-day seminar centered around beef cow nutrition and the economics of high reproductive performance. Percent of calves weaned per cows bred, is the "Gold Standard" of beef economics. It has everything to do with how profitable you are in the cow business.

In order to have great reproduction in your herd, the cows must be in good shape, a 5 or better condition score at calving and breeding. The extension specialists drove the point home, *you must provide adequate nutrition to get high reproductive performance…more calves at weaning*. They gave us good help in knowing what we needed to feed in order to achieve this higher productivity. It is critical to spend a little more on feed to maintain our cows in good condition. It will pay off at weaning. It was excellent information to help us maintain early calving.

I was taking it all in because we needed help. Our registered herd calves March 20 to May 20, which is just about as late as you can calve and still sell bulls ready to work by sale day on the second Saturday in April. We have been wintering them on range with only a urea laced mineral. They have not faired as well.

On the other hand, I was feeling pretty fortunate. Our commercial herd was calving in June and July. If the critical time for the cow to have a body condition score of 5 or better is at calving and breeding, then *we were there without any added feed or help*. Those commercial cows go on to the winter range in good shape 6 or better body condition, lose some weight through the winter, regain weight and body condition April through May and calve in June and July in great condition. The same cows milk much heavier than they ever did when we were supplementing them all winter.

There is less stress on the cows and on the cowboys. There is less labor. Not only is there less labor, but there is a better balance of all things that need to be done and the hands you have to do the jobs. In the spring, life is naturally very busy, we are hauling water on the desert winter range, the irrigation water begins to run, fields and pastures need work, the Forest Service expects the fences fixed before you turn out on June 1st, your neighbor needs help branding, we need to find and buy bulls, etc.

You can handle these chores, but add calving first calf heifers, treating scours, feeding all the cattle you have in close, supplementing and substitute feeding the cows on the range because the weathered picked over short feed doesn't even come close to meeting the needs of that cow with a new calf, keeping those calves healthy, gathering the winter range and moving toward the summer pasture, branding. You just do not get every thing done, there is a lot of neglect and frustration as you scramble to do every thing that ought to be done.

Whereas, the June/July calving cows demand and need much less attention. They still must survive the spring, the long walk to water, range forage that is sparse and weathered. But, without a calf at side they do it easier, better. Trailing from winter range to summer range is easier for the cow and for the cowboy. Life is simpler, there is less that must be done. Rather than spending several days branding, etc., the cows are just eased by the corral and on to the summer range where they begin calving. It works great and it is less frustrating, less stressful.

THERE ARE MORE MARKET OPTIONS, MORE MARKETING FLEXIBILITY WITH YOUNGER, LIGHTER CALVES.

In the mountain west, a March calf weighing five to six hundred pounds at seven months has only a few market options. A four weight June calf has more options. The June calf has time to meet many different markets and different market dates.

Some of the options we have used:

- <u>Leaving the calves on the cow to winter on the range</u>, delay weaning until March.

Replacement heifers wintered with their mothers have benefited greatly from the experience of learning the range at the mother's side. Learning what is good to eat, what is poisonous and should not be eaten, where to find water, how to survive bad weather. Our replacement heifers have spent two winters on the range before they calve at 23 to 24 months of age. They spent one winter as a calf at their mother's side. They spent next winter on the range as a pregnant yearling. These heifers calved in mid May calving on the range unassisted.

After spending the winter on the range with their mother, there are more options:

- Sell in March as 5 weights
- Pasture them through the summer and sell in September as 8 weights
- Feed to choice finished beef

- <u>Wean by December 1st, send to Kansas wheat pasture or California winter pastures</u>
    - Sell off pasture in May
    - Feed to choice, selling September 1st
    - Summer pasture in the mountains
    - Sell off summer pasture, September
    - Feed to choice, selling in December

<u>- Wean by December 1st and send to a growing feedlot</u>
    - Feed to keep healthy
        - Sell in the spring
        - Pasture then through the summer
            - Sell in September
            - Feed to choice, December
    - Feed for rapid growth
        - Sell as cattle ready to be finished, March-May
        - Feed to Choice, June-August

<u>- Wean and send to a finishing feedlot, selling in June-July</u>
    - Heavy calves in October have fewer options.

WHAT BENEFITS HAVE WE SEEN FROM CHANGING TO JUNE CALVING?

1- Lower operating costs: feed and labor

2- Cows in better condition when they calve

3- Better milking cows, we expected 3 weights in December, we have 4 weights

4- Better calf survival, More calves weaned 2 to 3%. Calves born June rather than March, out of the same bull, are 20% lighter. The calf is born easier. The calf is dropped in green pasture in warm weather. Life is better.

5- More marketing options. Unexpected: stronger market, even a premium, for the 4 weights over 5 & 6 weights. Some years the 4 weights have grossed more per head than the 5 weights.

6- Branding is more fun. Branding in August on the mountain with the grand kids, friends and neighbors is more fun than any hectic spring branding.

7- Life is better, less stressful. Moving from winter range to summer range, we not only do not brand etc., we do not even go into the corral. We just let these heavy laden cows drift on to the forest where they begin calving on there own.

When talking to ranch managers about the benefits of calving in tune with Mother Nature, they talked about lower cost, balanced labor load, and having more market options. But, the benefit every rancher mentioned as the greatest benefit, a benefit they didn't foresee, a benefit that was somewhat unexpected, the benefit that made the most difference in their lives was the **improvement in quality of life**. Yep, that's right! These hard nosed workaholic cowboys said to a man, spring is great, we like spring. We don't miss trying to warm up frozen calves and fighting a losing battle with calf scours. We don't miss moving cows and calves when the calves are really too small to travel. We like not working ourselves and our help to the breaking point March through May. We like spring.

WHAT HAS NOT WORKED WELL?

1- We cannot brag about the weaning weights of our calves but, we can feel good about their weight per day of age and how well they sell.

2- Some neighbors are still making fun of us. They believe we have indeed shot ourselves in the foot.

3- The cowboys and their horses have put on weight.

4- And the gnats in Greasewood have lost weight, they have less time to chew on cowboy ears. We don't need to go back to pickup cows with little calves or mismatched cows and calves.

5- The serious concern: Getting cows to breed up on mature grass can lead to fewer cows pregnant, 1 to 2%. This we didn't expect. The cows were in good shape. We had saved plenty of feed for the breeding season (August 20th to October 20th). Most of the grass had gone to seed and the nutritional value was declining. Of course, the Purina response was: "we can sell you a supplement that will solve that problem". Our goal is to solve this shortcoming without added feed expense.

Our range manager, Alan Hatch, believes this year will be better. He has been using some electric fence on the mountain which has kept the cattle on fresher feed and kept the cattle closer together, thus closer to the bulls.

Next year, we are great "Next Year" folks. Next year, we are in hopes of providing higher quality feed by returning in September and October to the re-growth in pastures grazed in June and July. Some of the forage should still be green and growing with better overall forage value.

Even though we experienced lower pregnancy rates in the first two years of June/July calving, our total number of calves weaned per cow bred increased slightly due to better calf survival.

Is calving in June/July a good idea? Are we glad we made the change? Oh yes! We would not give up the lower expenses, the lower labor, the lower stress on cows and cowboys, the greater marketing options nor the improvement in quality of life.

We are recovering pretty well from the shot in the foot. All the worries about keeping the cows in shape to calve and breed…are no worry. Mother Nature or the range is providing all the feed to keep the cows in the right condition to calve and to milk and to breed back. It feels good to be in sync with the land and the forage produced. We like the options…marketing options. We like spring. We like lower costs. We like less stress. Life is better.