



Timing Is Everything

Summer-born calves fit a cattle-hungry market that rewards quality.

Story & photos by
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Nebraska grazer and cattle feeder Doug Shepperd likes doing business with cattlemen who think “outside the envelope” and recognize the importance of timely marketing.

Doug Shepperd doesn't own any cows. He fills his pastures with about 4,000 yearlings, eventually feeding them out in his own feedlot. But, if Shepperd did own a bunch of cows, he'd want them to calve in May and June. He's quite sure about it, and willing to share his perspective with his neighbors in northern Nebraska and southern South Dakota.

Many of those neighbors do run cows. Most of them calve in March, which is pretty typical for the Northern Plains. A few of those neighbors are plenty adamant about why their choice of calving season is better. When they get together with Shepperd, some good-natured bickering is to be expected.

“It's all in fun,” Shepperd says, grinning. He admits he has no business criticizing people who have good reasons for what they do and the ways they do it. “I do wonder about people that do something a certain way only because of tradition — because that's the way their dad and granddad did it,” he adds.

But what does Shepperd know about calving seasons or managing a cow herd

anyway? Well, he wasn't always a yearling man and feeder.

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Shepperd was raised near the community of Mills, represented by one of the smallest dots on a Nebraska map. Several miles south of the South Dakota border, in that rolling country between the Niobrara and Keya Paha rivers, Shepperd grew up on his family's cow-calf operation. After college, he spent most of a decade managing cows, first with his dad and then on his own. He built his herd up to about 600 mother cows that calved mostly in March.

"I used to do it like most people do, calving those cows in the early spring," Shepperd says. "I had to get out of the cow business to see that calves born in May and June offered advantages."

By the early 1990s, Shepperd had decided to ease out of the cow business and go a different direction. He cut way back on hay production and incorporated former hay meadows, along with owned and leased pastures, into intensive, rotational grazing systems for yearlings. The addition of a backgrounding yard allowed him to buy calves during the winter and grow them until grass greened up in the spring. He also offered custom grazing and backgrounding services to other ranchers.

With intensive grazing management, timing is everything. Typically using relatively high stocking rates, a savvy manager has to move cattle through pastures in timely fashion to achieve optimum forage production and animal performance. But, timing is everything when it comes to cattle marketing, too. Shepperd recognized that a good market existed for cattle that were finished and ready for harvest in the fall. That's a time when fed-cattle supplies typically are low.

"I believe you have to look for a marketing advantage," Shepperd says. "It's always an advantage if you have something buyers want when there isn't much of it around."

Shepperd targeted that window of opportunity by adding more bunk space to finish yearlings after they came off summer grass. For the "right kind" of cattle, it's a short summer on the range, ending in late July or August.

"We can start our grazing season early (late April or early May) by planting a winter annual, like rye, and grazing it hard. Then we rotate through our native pastures. But, cool-season grasses are dominant, so nutrient value is highest and cattle gains are best early in the summer. We come off grass fairly early, and get those cattle on feed," Shepperd explains.

The right kind

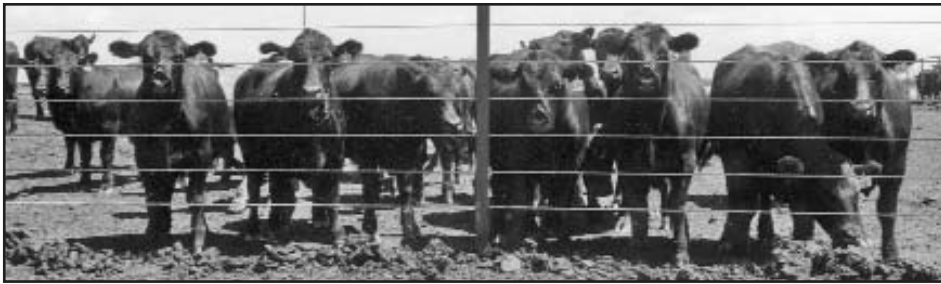
It works best with the right kind of cattle alluded to earlier — good-quality May- and June-born calves. Angus America's Mark Nelson agrees. The marketing network coordinator has worked with Shepperd in the marketing of fed cattle, but there was a time when



They're hard to find, but the grass cattle that Shepperd prefers are May- and June-born calves. The true yearlings fit a summer grazing program, go on through the feedlot and hit a typically cattle-hungry market that rewards quality.

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Timely marketing means Shepperd will start selling fed cattle in December, when prices usually jump. But, February prices are even better, with a wide Choice-Select spread.



Nelson doubted whether grazing yearlings was efficient. Most cattle, he believed, achieved optimum efficiency when they were sent directly to a feedlot after weaning.

“Holding cattle back so you can send them to grass for five months is, in most cases, inefficient,” Nelson states. “But, May-June calves fit an abbreviated summer grazing program. They fit it really well.”

Nelson’s ideal scenario would see summer-born calves weaned in December or January, then backgrounded until spring grass is available. Assuming the calves gain 1½ to 2 pounds (lb.) per day during backgrounding and continue to gain well on pasture, they could go into the feedlot by midsummer.

Nelson thinks calves should be pushed a little bit during backgrounding, but not too hard. Shepperd echoes that, noting how calves that are too fleshy at turnout are likely to go backward unless they receive supplemental feed while on pasture. However, if the calves are handled right and forage production is at least average, he looks for good 600- to 650-lb. calves to achieve grass gains of about 2 lb. per day. They can go to the feedlot in late July or early August, weighing 775-800 lb., and be finished for a fall harvest.

Ideally, Nelson would like to see more cattle placed in the feedlot by early July and finished for market in October. Historically, that’s when fed-cattle supplies run short and the market takes a jump. And, because there is a shortage of higher grading carcasses, the Choice-Select spread is wide. Those conditions usually persist into November and December.

Another reason that Nelson likes the idea of more summer calves is that they would contribute to a year-round supply of finished cattle aged 20 months or less. As the ability to verify the age of cattle for harvest becomes increasingly important, particularly due to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) testing standards, foreign markets may restrict their U.S. purchases to beef from cattle that are no more than 20 months old.

Shepperd’s main complaint about May-June calves is that there aren’t enough of them. Of the calves he buys for himself and his customers, less than 40% fit the “ideal” for age. So, he buys some lightweight older calves and has tried fall calves, too.

“Fall calves can go to grass, but they don’t seem to grade as well for us in the end — at least not consistently well. The maturity isn’t there,” Shepperd offers. “But whenever I hear about somebody that calves in May and June, I want to talk to them. Those calves fit our program.”

Shepperd confesses he has been thinking about getting some cows again, breeding them to calve in May and June. Maybe in a year or two. Cow prices are pretty high right now, and timing is everything.