

Calving On Grass Helps Drive Rancher Success

10 Common questions and answers for South Dakota ranchers

(Answers compiled from South Dakota NRCS and SDSU Extension Rangeland Management Specialists and ranchers experienced in later calving success.)

Q: Why consider calving on grass, and what is “calving with nature”?

A: As ranchers grow tired of the increasing animal loss and human stress caused by calving during more extreme February and March weather, winter calving traditions continue to be re-examined in South Dakota. “Calving on Grass” or calving in late April, May or June has become the management tool of choice for dozens of ranchers who discuss their journey of change in the South Dakota Grassland Coalition’s excellent 25-video series on [Alternative Calving Dates](#).

These ranchers take the [calving with nature](#) to heart, helping their heifers and cows do more of the work by calving during the warmer months. This change requires less labor, feed and vet bills while delivering more live calves born healthier on green grass. This timing is similar to how deer adapt to nature, as they are known for giving birth to fawns when conditions are best for their survival. Quality of life for cow, calf and rancher, along with improved ranch profitability, are the most significant reasons these ranchers push calving later.

Q: What important considerations should be discussed before quitting traditional winter calving?

A: According to South Dakota ranchers who transitioned to later calving, they recommend:

- **Mental and physical check:** Change is hard, but an open mind can help reduce egos and the toughness badge of honor and consider real family mental and physical stress when calving in winter. Ranchers find spring calving improves human health, reduces stress and improves family relationships.
- **Animal health:** Losing fewer calves is a critical driving force behind ranchers who switched to later calving. Allowing mothers to birth healthy calves by themselves on green grass with little stress is a game-changer. In addition, cows can graze early to prepare for calving, which reduces hay costs for cows and vet bills for calves.
- **Time and labor:** It’s a myth that later calving competes with spring farming practices, as producers who have switched report less time and labor is needed during calving, compared to March-April calving.
- **Financial bottom line:** The input investment for cows and calves can drop dramatically with later calving. Producers no longer need to maintain cow condition during the worst winter months when feed and yardage costs are the highest. Cows can graze April pasture to get in condition for May calving. And calves born on green May pastures are healthier with less risk of expensive vet bills.

Q: What are the biggest learning curves when moving to later calving?

A: Once you've decided to explore a shift to late April/early May calving on grass, the best advice from experienced ranchers is to find a mentor and understand their journey. Evaluate all aspects of your calving system to develop a comprehensive game plan. Examine your infrastructure, labor, land, and financial resources. Learn potential transition issues and possible changes with marketing, genetics and cow/calf sizing, cow and bull management, and the appropriate length of a transition phase to increase success.

Selby rancher Doug Sieck learned that he could feasibly do less farming and more grazing, expanding his cow-calf herd to make it all profitable. "It's not just looking at profit per acre, but how the whole package fits together," he says. "If you're nice to the soil, using no-till and cover crops in a responsible manner, then aggregate stability will stay there. That means when it rains, it soaks right in rather than running off. My pastures keep that moisture to feed my cattle."

Q: How do cows optimize condition before calving when fed less winter hay?

A: Planning your calving pastures is critical to optimize heifer/cow conditioning before calving. Experienced ranchers who calve in late April/early May find that grazing in pastures with a combination of tall old grass that hasn't been grazed for 10 months and new green grass and forbs matches well with the [nutritional needs of cows](#) before and during late-spring calving. In addition, this pasture-based calving significantly reduces costs per cow [compared to winter calving](#) that relies on abundant hay fed during February for March calving.

Hanson County rancher Mike Blaalid believes his cattle stay in better shape by grazing them early before calving while saving money on not feeding as much hay during the winter. "The cows have good green grass to bulk up on during the last two to three weeks of April before they calve in May," he says. "These cows then teach their calves how to graze, taking care of the flush of cool-season invasive grasses, brome and Kentucky bluegrass, which helps promote growth of my native warm-season grasses that add diversity and help build soil health and water infiltration."

Q: What about infrastructure needs when shifting to calving on grass?

A: When March and early April blizzards are no longer a factor during May calving, ranchers have less need for expensive building infrastructure. "Since there are fewer problems with later calving, we can get by with very few facilities. When we think of infrastructure now, we think of a single strand of hotwire," says [Wecota rancher Gene Holt](#). "Sure, we have some windbreaks and some portable structures we can set up, but for the most part, it turns your focus away from the barn and to the land itself. And when you focus on that, that's where the financial gain can come."

Q: Can I get by with less labor and have time for spring fieldwork?

A: Calving on grass in late April/May can greatly reduce labor because cows can more easily take care of themselves in better weather. Ranchers who expand their herd, or are getting older, or are just starting in the cow/calf business are all benefiting from later calving while accomplishing other spring tasks.

Since Roscoe rancher Jonathan Rohrbach switched to May calving, he hasn't had to check cattle at night for the last eight years. "With May calving on green grass, it's less labor-intensive, the weather is nicer, and I have a lot less calf sickness and scours. I only need to check cows in the morning and evening, which helps me get my farming done, thanks to a switch to no-till farming that has eased the springtime burden."

Q: How does the financial picture change with calving on grass?

A: Ranchers who have switched to later calving find drastic savings in input expense, especially compared to maintaining cows in top condition in the worst winter months. Secondly, they end up with more live calves.

Quinn rancher Pat Guptill encourages other ranchers to examine the cost of production closely. "We've cut our input costs to less than half of what it used to be with earlier calving. Many producers think the cost of production doesn't change no matter your calving date, but that's not true. When feed costs are 50 to 80% of the cost of that calf, in our case, at 5-7 lbs. of hay per day in the winter is way less than 35-40 lbs. of hay per day plus the high energy feed needed to keep them in shape to calve in March. We don't have to raise a bigger calf. We just have to raise a live calf."

Q: Should I consider shifting cattle genetics when calving on grass?

A: Many ranchers who have transitioned from March to May calving begin a culling process of larger framed, heavier milking cows to smaller framed animals.

Other ranchers gave up chasing high pounds of production per year, transitioning to smaller cows rather than staying with high input larger farmed cows. These producers have already seen input savings and big benefits from better cow management with smaller bulls.

Q: Can later calving provide me with more marketing options?

A: Many ranchers who have switched to later calving on grass have changed their culling and marketing strategy to transition cows, heifers or bulls that don't fit into a May calving program. Often they're the most expensive and highest maintenance animals in the herd, so the key is to cull them at the right time to maximize their value.

Bart Carmichael, who ranches near Faith, sees a wide variety of marketing options when switching to later calves. "These calves are the best grain bin we have, like crop farmers who can hold for better markets. If the market is right in the fall, you can sell that calf right off the cow," he says. "You can also background them; you can take them partially through or all the way to green grass and sell them. Later calving gives you so many more options for marketability, versus coming in with a heavy calf in the fall with the only option of going to the feedlot."

Q: How quickly should a ranch transition to later calving?

A: A decision to move quickly or slowly depends on resource availability and the potential fall-out of animals that may not fit the new program. Some ranchers recommend moving a week or two later, and some with larger herds will make the jump from March to May right away.

Highmore rancher Jim Faulstich says that if you make the transition more gradual, you won't affect the cycles near as much—moving a week or two at a time versus two months. “Moving from March to April calving is like hopping out of the frying pan and into the skillet, so there are concerns doing that. If you have tall grass cover for the calves, you can probably get by with that in April if you only have 50 cows. If you have 1,000 cows, I'd probably make that jump from March to May all at once to avoid April calving.”

Faulstich reminds ranchers to plan on either keeping a lot of heifers on hand or have some cows available to buy during the transition to later calving. And he recommends making sure your banker is on board to help absorb the fact that you may have some more open cows initially. “On the other hand, it's what you end up with that counts. You may have more open cows, but you may have a lot more live calves, so the economics may warrant skipping from March to May calving.”

Bottom line, Lowry rancher Lyle Perman says that later calving makes keeping cows on the landscape easier. “A lot of people have gotten out of the livestock business because it's a lot of work, and I can't deny that,” he says. But by moving to later calving, you'll find that your labor requirements and stress levels will go down, your quality of life will go up, and maybe you can stay in the livestock business. All this will improve water quality, air quality, soil health, habitat for wildlife, and at the end of the day, everybody and everything wins.”

For More Information:

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition offers an excellent 25-video series on [Alternative Calving Dates](#) that feature South Dakota ranchers who have successfully moved their calving dates into late April, May and June.

USDA NRCS-South Dakota website page “[Calving Considerations](#).”

[Growing Resilience Through Our Soils](#) offers expanding content from South Dakota ranchers.