

Should You Have a Breeding Season and How Long?

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Last month this column discussed when beef cows should be bred in south Florida. Most ranchers in south Florida use a winter breeding season, starting in December or early January, because they can wean a heavy calf to sell on a higher valued market in July or August. An equally important management decision is how long the cow herd should be exposed to bulls. A confined breeding season is important because: 1. all cows are on the same production cycle and can be supplemented more efficiently, worked as a group at palpation and culling, and better monitored at calving; 2. calves are born within a short period and are similar in age and size at branding, weaning, and marketing (large numbers of uniform calves bring better prices); 3. replacement heifers are similar in age and easily managed as a group; and 4. record keeping is made simpler.

How long should the cow herd be exposed? The length of the breeding season depends on the level of management. Where good perennial grass pastures are maintained, along with providing ryegrass, clover and/or a good winter supplementation program, a breeding season of 90 days or less is adequate. In less intensive operations where cattle depend mostly on perennial grass forage or range, a 120 day or longer breeding season may be best. However, long breeding seasons of 120 to 180 days present problems with weaning and marketing of uniform calves on one date.

For cows to breed early, they must be provided good nutrition during the early part of the breeding season. If they are not provided good nutrition many cows tend to breed late, especially if the latter part of the breeding season includes the spring. Since excellent quality forage is usually available in the spring it is a natural time for cows to breed, and once they breed at this time they will continue to do so in future years. Thus, they will always wean a young, light-weight calf if weaned in the late summer or fall.

If a cow misses breeding during the first 90 days when she is 4 to 6 years old (which is common for first- and second-calf cows), it would actually be best for her to remain open and breed early during the following breeding season. Remember, brahman-cross cows produce good, heavy calves until they are 12 years of age or older. A 150 to 200 pound heavier calf at weaning every year from a cow with an early calving date quickly makes up for the one year she is open.

Producers using a breeding season of 120 days or more should evaluate the distribution of

calf births. If a sizeable percentage of calves are born during the latter half of a long calving season, it would be profitable to wean calves at two or more times during the year. Many producers use two weaning dates for this purpose. In the long term, it might be most profitable to shorten the breeding season and let those late calving cows miss a year, then get them bred in the early part of a shorter breeding season. The shorter breeding season is very important if one weaning and marketing date is used.

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