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When Should Cows Be Bred In South Florida?

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The season cows are bred is important from three perspectives: 1) the nutrition and condition of the cow when exposed to the bull, 2) the time of year when the calf is born, 3) and the time of year when the calf is weaned and marketed.

The traditional breeding season for south Florida was during the spring (March through June), when pastures started growing and cows were thought to cycle best. At one time, south Florida ranchers could also grow good white clover during late winter and early spring which was a natural for milk production and getting cows to cycle.

In recent years, ranchers have moved toward winter breeding, putting bulls out in December and January. The reason for this change was to wean heavy calves at a better marketing time. With a breeding season starting in December or January average calving date will be from mid-October to late November, thus, a heavy 8- to 9-month-old calf can be weaned in June, July or August. Feeder calf prices are normally higher during these summer months than in September and October when a high percentage of calves from the southeast are sold.

One analysis was made of calf records to determine the effect of month of birth on the weaning weight of calves born on the muck soils of south Florida (Fla. Ag. Exp. Sta., Technical Bull. 663, 1963). Calves born after November were 20 pounds heavier at 205 days of age (6.8 months) than calves born before November. Calves born during August, September, and October must contend with warm weather, an abundance of biting insects, late summer heavy rains, and cows must nurse a heavy calf through the winter and dry spring.

Considering the nutrition of cows grazing sand land pastures, a breeding season starting in December or January may be better than spring breeding in terms of the quantity of

forage available and the cow's body condition. The spring produces better quality forage, but because March, April, and May are often dry, the quantity of grass available is low.

Since 1993, the Range Cattle REC has compared two 90-day breeding seasons. One began on December 15, and the second began on March 1. The cows used were Brahman, Angus, and Charolais and various crosses of these three breeds. Cows were bred to Simbrah bulls. Cows grazed bahiagrass pasture. Winter-bred cows were fed 5 lbs/cow/day of molasses slurry from start of calving (September 27) to April 4, averaging 945 lbs/ cow. Spring-bred cows were fed 5 lbs/ cow/day of molasses slurry from start of calving (December 2) to April 18 averaging 688 lbs/cow. Cows in both treatments were fed stargrass hay ad lib from mid-December through March. Winter-bred cows were fed 892 lbs of hay/cow and spring-bred cows were fed 723 lbs of hay/cow.

Over four years, calves born during the fall from winter-bred cows were 35 pounds heavier (509 vs. 474 lbs) at weaning (230 days or 7.7 months) than calves born during the winter from spring-bred cows. There was no difference in pregnancy rate of lactating cows bred during the winter (78.4%) and lactating cows bred during the spring (78.7%). At weaning, winter-bred cows had a body condition of 5.4, compared to 5.2 for spring-bred cows.

This study will continue two more years. The first four years indicates that under south Florida conditions, winter-bred cows produce heavier calves at weaning than spring-bred cows, but at a cost of 250 lbs more liquid feed and 150 lbs more hay. Ranchers who calve their cows during the fall have the added option of leaving the calf on the cow for a longer period to utilize abundant summer forages and possibly sell on a better market.