

News Column

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SANDHILLS CALVING SYSTEM

My dad understood the basic concept behind the Sandhills Calving System long before it had a name. Calves that are spread out, and born on pasture, are less likely to get sick (mostly with scours) than calves born in smaller calving pens.

Dad didn't move pregnant cows to a new pasture every two weeks like is prescribed in the Sandhills Calving System, but he was adamant about not calving up-close in a dry lot. Part of the reason he wouldn't calve in the dry lot near the barn was because the dry lot was never actually dry....and he also knew he would have scour problems if we had a bunch of calves born in such a small space.

I would guess I was about 13 years old when I suggested calving in a pen, then turning cow-calf pairs out after they calved. I was tired of having to bring cows in from a half mile away when they needed help delivering a calf, so calving up-close seemed logical to me.

Dad told me very clearly (and loudly) that we would never do that! There were some things he would let me try so I could learn from my mistakes, but this wasn't one of them.

The reason for implementing a Sandhills Calving System is primarily to prevent calf scours. Because calf scours rarely occur in the first two weeks of the calving season, why not try to re-create those same conditions by re-starting the calving season every two weeks?

That's how the Sandhills Calving System works. The system requires multiple calving pastures. Cows are kept in the first pasture as calving season approaches and the clock starts

when the first calf is born. Two weeks after the first calf is born, cows with calves are left in the first pasture and pregnant cows are moved to clean ground.

The cycle of moving pregnant cows every two weeks and leaving cow-calf pairs behind continues until the last calf is born. With a 60 day calving season you would only need four pastures.

Permanent pastures aren't necessary – a hot wire creating paddocks within an existing pasture will do the job. Surprisingly, the occasional calf sneaking under the hot wire doesn't contaminate the clean pasture and break the system. It still works.

After getting past the need for four or more pastures, producers are most likely to focus on the challenge of sorting cows every two weeks. I admit that I haven't done this, but those who have will say it isn't as hard as you might expect.

In my experience, cows with young calves want to stay with those calves, and pairs moves slower than the rest of the herd. In a gentle cow herd you should be able to walk the pregnant cows to the next pasture while the mommas stay behind, either nursing or just moving slow enough to allow for separation.

If it isn't easy the first time, I guarantee it will get easier,... because you'll note the crazies and sell them before calving time next year.

Why does a Sandhills Calving System work? It works because calves two weeks to a couple of months old are responsible for shedding the most pathogens, and calves under two weeks of age are the most likely to become sick and die from calf scours.

Moving pregnant cows to a fresh pasture effectively re-starts the calving season and prevents newborn calves from being exposed to high levels of pathogens that build up in a calving pasture and continue to be spread by baby calves.

If you attended our livestock association spring meeting a couple of weeks ago you heard Bob Larson compare it to taking your new baby to daycare. He said you either want to go to a small daycare where your baby is the only young child, or to a really big daycare where the kids are spread out and babies are kept in a separate room, away from all the snotty nosed toddlers. Otherwise your baby will get sick all the time.

It works the same way with calves. If the babies are kept away from the older calves they won't be exposed to as many pathogens, and the incidence of scours will decline dramatically.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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