

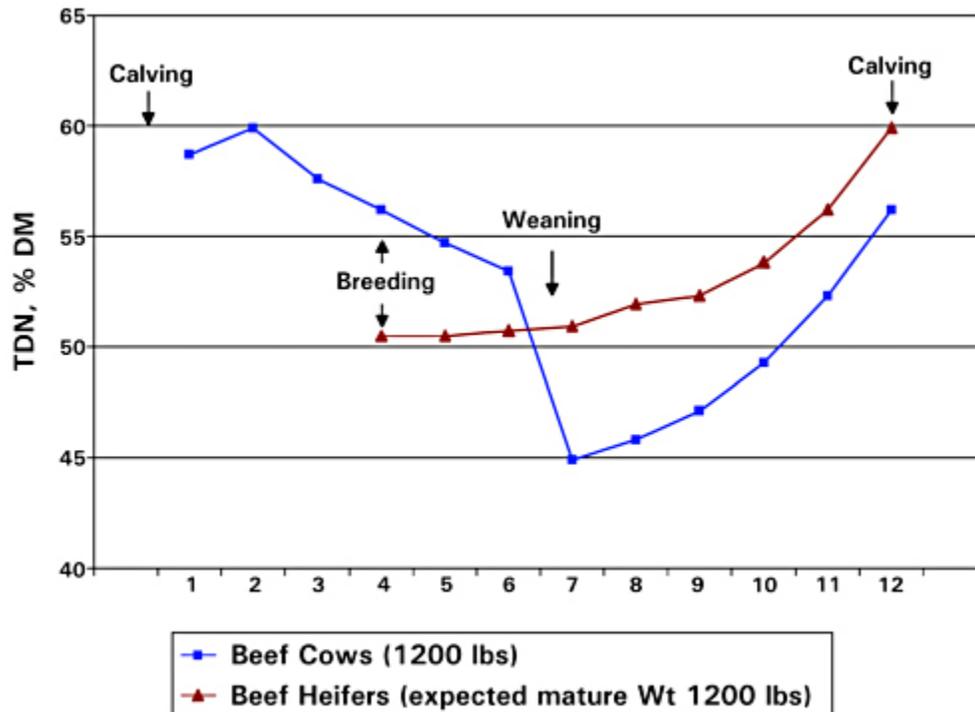
# First and Second Steps in Taking Charge of Your Cow-Calf Operation

Dr. Mark A. McCann  
Extension Animal Scientist, VA Tech

Tougher economic conditions usually stimulate a greater interest in belt tightening and becoming more efficient whether it is household or farm expenses. Low input/management cattle operations which run a bull year round many times are puzzled about where and how to start getting better control of their herd management. It really is quite simple and is based on removing the bull first and following up with pregnancy determination. These two steps are fundamental to raising the management level of any size cow-calf enterprise.

Herd health practices, nutritional decisions, genetic selection and calf market value all hinge on managing cattle at a similar stage of their production cycle. The only way to achieve this end is by controlling the breeding season with an ultimate goal of reaching a 75-90 day breeding season. The following figure depicts the energy requirements (TDN) of beef cows and replacement heifers over a production cycle. The variation in energy needs should make two clear points:

1. Controlling the calving season makes it possible to match the cow's nutritional needs to your peak forage supply.
2. If supplementation is needed, the herd's nutritional needs will be similar rather over feeding and underfeeding cows at very different levels of production.



Source: Nutrient Requirements of Beef Cattle, 2000

Similar examples of benefits to other management areas can be drafted for herd health practices, calving management, calf marketing and record keeping.

Once bulls are removed, the second important step is pregnancy determination. Identification of open cows allows their culling after the calf is weaned. Pregnancy checking heifers 45-60 days following removal of the bull allows early identification of open heifers that can be marketed as yearlings and are young enough to go to a feedlot and be fed for the choice beef market. Slow identification or longer retention of these open heifers increases the likelihood that a 4-5 month feeding period could make them close to “B” maturity (30 months or older) at slaughter. As cattle approach this line their live value is diminished as a function of what their final value is projected to be.

Other factors which favor pregnancy determination are the identification and removal of sub-fertile females. This allows culling of females which are under-performing in an operation’s management and environment. Additionally this insures that only pregnant females are managed and fed during the expensive winter feeding period.

Our current economic environment emphasizes increased efficiency to remain competitive. For producers not already managing the breeding season, these two steps are vital first steps in cow management and open the door for many other opportunities in the future.