

Have you checked your calving distribution lately?

Dana Zook: [00:00:00] Welcome back to the Extension Experience Podcast. I'm Dana Zook I'm happy to be back with you this summer day. It rained this morning. It's June 30th, very end of June. June has just flown by. I'm joined by my friend Scott Clawson, who is the Northeast area AG economist.

Scott, thank you so much for joining me this morning.

Scott Clawson: You're very welcome. Always look forward to it.

Dana Zook: This is kind of a midsummer discussion. Before we started recording, we discussed what you've been up to, . You wanna share something fun and notable that has happened so far this summer?

Scott Clawson: Oh man. So you know, the rain has been great but as a, as a dad of two teenage sons that play a lot of baseball, it can make for a really hectic summer. So with all the cancellations and postponements and all that kind of stuff. So it adds a, a level of difficulty to the summer, but it's well worth it to, to keep everybody from dealing with drought stuff for once.

Dana Zook: Yeah, I mean that has been quite a change, still pretty dry where I'm from originally [00:01:00] in Nebraska, but they got some rain last night, so I was glad to hear about that. Otherwise we don't share how much rain we caught.

Scott Clawson: Yeah, that's right. That's right.

Dana Zook: But so far this summer the lake has been a.

Pretty bright spot for me. So I haven't been at the baseball field, Scott, but we have hit the lake with my kids and that, that's been pretty fun a couple times. As,

Scott Clawson: as with every summer we're, we're making it a family goal to go to every gas station and, and ballpark from here to wherever. 'cause that's all we ever do.

Stop at the gas station, fill up, grab some food, and, and get back on the road.

Dana Zook: Right, right. Well, what's your favorite baseball food since you were there all the time?

Scott Clawson: I'm just a, just a regular hotdog. Like I just, I, and I'll eat 'em at home. Like I don't care. Mm-hmm. But like, I, I don't know what it is, but man, hot dogs, that, that's where it's at for me.

Dana Zook: Yeah, I agree. There's nothing like a good hotdog. Okay, Scott, so let's, let's dive right in. So you recently wrote an article in your Timely Topics newsletter, which is, newsletter that the Northeast puts out to their extension educators and then the extension educators [00:02:00] share to their local producers.

So your title of your article, this past month, was "Check Calving Distribution, Adding it to the To-Do List". So let's talk just a little bit about that, that, that intrigued me, Scott, it was a short article, but you know, it's, it's something extremely important when we really think about the, the baseline of that.

So. Why don't you just begin by talking about record keeping in general, and then we'll move into that specific record keeping topic. So why is record keeping important for our cow calf producers?

Scott Clawson: Yeah, that's kind of a, a tricky subject because if we were just to sit down and list like all the things that we would like to have the records for.

The list gets very long and cumbersome and, and I don't know about everybody else, but when I see something like that, I get, I get frustrated and, and I just kinda move on [00:03:00] and don't do any of it. And so, with our record keeping system, I think it's very important just to think about what is gonna be immediately usable from a decision making standpoint and, and how would it help us out?

And so, you know, that's why I always kind of keep this calving distribution. On my list because it's pretty simple. It's pretty to the point, and while it may not reveal every issue that we need, it will certainly let us know where there are issues and ways to improve.

Dana Zook: So sitting down and talking about what you really want to know is pretty important before you kind of dive into it.

Absolutely. Yeah. Keep records about everything.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. I would let that steer what, what you do from a record keeping standpoint.

Dana Zook: Yeah. So give us a basic definition of. Calving distribution.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. So, so calving distribution is, is just a way to look at when calves come in your calving season. So, we track a lot of [00:04:00] dates and, and things like that and, and maybe we miss some 'cause, you know, we're human, but because we're, we're just trying to, to get an idea of when those calves come in that calving season and.

With, with kind of the idea that we're better off by having the bulk of those calves coming as early as we can possibly get them on the ground.

Dana Zook: Just to give people context, the average gestation length of a cow is around 285, 286 days. So we've gotta keep her within that one year calving cycle. So you've have, what, 87 days, Scott? Is that kind of

Scott Clawson: Yeah. 80, 85, 90 days. Somewhere. Somewhere in that period.

Yeah. To, to kind of keep them on the same, calving at the same date every year. And so, if we break that measure down a little more, I think ideally kind of the textbook definition would be to break that down every 21 days, so your first 21 days, second, 21 days, third, 21 days, et cetera, and see how your calving dates are [00:05:00] skewed in that period.

Like I said, there's a lot of really technical ways to get it, but if we can get two thirds of the calf crop born in that first 21 days, I think we'd call that a win. And that's kind of what I always use as a target to shoot for. I.

Dana Zook: Yeah, so in your article, and I'm gonna, I'm gonna read to you what you wrote.

Oh, and I'm gonna share with the listeners. And I just, I really like these two sentences. And so it says there are a million articles, publications, and internet rabbit holes. Totally agree with that. That deal with calving Cows that match our environment. While that can mean many things, cows that are re breeding quickly after bull turnout and put a live calf on the ground early in the calving season are thriving in the environment they're in.

So you totally turned that on its head, Scott. And we simply need to look at that. And if they are breeding early and having calves early, then we know that. [00:06:00] They match their environment. I mean, that's a good measure.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. And you know,, it could be some discussions in there, like I said, the more rabbit holes you'd wanna dig in that.

But, there's, you know, you could get into Cal size, et cetera, and all those things are valid. But yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, each ranch has a set of resources, forage, land base, et cetera. We've got a set of input resources, right, that we're willing to put into the cow herd from a feed perspective, a hay perspective.

And then we have one that we don't talk about much is, is we've got a management style, you know, of, of how we think that the cow herd should run. There's folks that keep cows that really high body condition scores. There's folks that let him slip throughout the year and then rebuild at certain times.

There's a lot of management. That goes into that as well. I think at the end of the day, we find those cows that are consistently calving in those first 21 days. We have, found the cows that can do what we're asking them to do the best in the environment we're [00:07:00] providing.

And, and so like I said, there's a lot of ways to complicate things, but you know, if we just kind of take a step back and look at it, those cows that can consistently do that are, are doing the job that, that we're asking them to do.

Dana Zook: Okay, so what is the result of cows having calves earlier?

So there's many things. So let's talk a little bit about those, Scott, just, just ramble on.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. Okay. I can always do that. So, so yeah. So a couple of things I think to, to summarize it, there's a litany of, of research out there that talks about the benefits of having those calves coming early in the calving season and that research follows them both terminally and maternally all the way through their cycle, right? So we can talk about the steer calves that are born generally will outperform their, their later born contemporaries as they go all the way through the feed yard. You can find the heifers that come from that.

Even though [00:08:00] those are lowly, heritable traits, just from a reproductive perspective those retained heifers are, are really ideal candidates to be replacements in the cow herd.

Those calves that come early in the calving season are simply going to be heavier than the ones that come late in the season, right? Like, that's like the baseline of this. So if you think about, again, a lot of differences between cow herds, but that could be, between the first and second, cycle on those cows, that could be 40 pounds per 21 days. Right. Of extra weaning weight to sell. And as we know right now, the markets are wild. And, and that, that means a lot. And, and if you think about it just from a managing the cow herd perspective. I don't wanna say that's free weight gain, but to a certain degree it is.

Right. It didn't come via a creep feeder. It didn't come, you know, via anything else. We're already paying for the cow's expenses, she's the factory. We're just getting more weight to sell. Than what we would've otherwise. And so again, a lot of [00:09:00] ways to project that out in terms of value. But at the end of the day, one of the biggest benefits is simply those older calves generally weigh more, and that gives us a, a revenue advantage.

Dana Zook: Yeah. I will add too, I mean, if we think about breed back. Cows that have calves earlier, just have extra time. They just hopefully naturally, if our environment allows 'em to do that and nothing happens, they will just naturally breed back earlier. Just a lot of benefits to that.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. And then I think that once we see, maybe we sit down and, and look at our, calving records for the year and see that maybe our, our distribution is off to some degree. Let's say maybe it's, maybe we're 40% in the first cycle, or the first 21 days. It didn't give us an answer, but it gives us an idea that maybe we could improve our efficiency to some degree and then go back and try to figure out like, why, why were we a little slight, did we [00:10:00] have bull issues?

Whereas our body condition scores in, in bad shape going into breeding season, you know, we can, we can start to chase down the reasons as to why maybe that distribution was off and start to address some of those.

Dana Zook: Yeah, so some of those environmental effects. So it could be weather that affected us.

I'm just a harper of stocking rates, like I'm always onto that 'cause I feel we could do so much better as far as that goes naturally. Previous year's calving

dates, so, so if someone listens to this and says, oh gosh, I need to straighten some things up. This isn't something that can happen just overnight.

Right, Scott?

Scott Clawson: No, absolutely not. And you know what? I, whenever I'm doing, meetings with producers and things like that. We've all got stories about, a cow that let's say she calved, 30 days earlier, this year than she did last year.

And, and so those, those cases are always out there. So we're speaking kind of this from a, maybe a [00:11:00] more kind of general cow herd dynamic. But I guess I would say even to those cows that are, are willing to do that for us. We can't ever go back and make up the weight that we didn't get in those previous years, so, so it still matters.

And, and getting, one or two cows that'll do that for us, that's great. But can we get 10, can we get 15? That's when we're talking about, making real differences just kind of economically within the cow herd. So, so you're right there. There's not an easy fix to it necessarily.

But I think it would give us a signal that we, we maybe need to sit down and think about why is our distribution. Not what maybe is ideal, and then how, how can we deal with it? What do we need to go fixing?

Dana Zook: Yeah. It's, it could be, it could be just some change over time. Mm-hmm.

Some progressive change. Yeah. More than one cow at a time. For sure. Yeah. So, Scott, as, as an economist, you look at numbers all day long, much more than I do. I look at feed numbers and geek out on [00:12:00] that. This might be one of the most important things to look at for your cows. Is that right? And if it is, what are some other things that producers can hone in on that are kind of up there on the top of the list, but maybe not quite as important?

Scott Clawson: Yeah. So I think one of the big benefits of doing this is it's just easy, right?

Like, we don't we don't have to run through the scales. We don't have to, go and gather any complicated stuff. Like it's all stuff that we probably know. And so I, I think that's important just, as a starting point, as can we find something that's easily easily to get the data or the records right?

And then easy to interpret those things. That's one of the things that I really like about just using this as a starting point. It doesn't, it doesn't require much from a records perspective, and it can be an indicator of just how efficient that we're operating.

From going past that, we've got the basic stuff, reproductive rates, et cetera re breeding rates, things like that. I think those are all that, all [00:13:00] important things. Really interested. In pounds, weaned per acre a lot of times. I think that's where we can really make some evaluations from an efficiency standpoint, right? Like it's, it's not just about and, and you find that with a lot of other records. I think a lot of the most insightful economic records are things that we measure more on a whole, right? We're not necessarily concerned about individual animal performance.

We know we're gonna have those outstanding individuals within our herds, but what does the total look like? And I think when we get to the per acre concepts, we really start to see, based on our land resource, what type of performance are we getting out of that cow herd. So again, I would glean to anything that's measured kind of from a, from a per acre standpoint that would encompass stocking rates, cow size, et cetera.

That's kind of a, when we go per acre, that really, levels the playing field, I guess you'd say.

Dana Zook: Yeah. Kind of a systems approach. Yeah, absolutely. Like take a step back. What can we look at [00:14:00] broadly?

Scott Clawson: I. Absolutely.

Dana Zook: Yeah. I always like Earl's cow size calf weaned per cow, you know, I always like that. Mm-hmm.

But again, that gets a little more complicated because you gotta weigh those cows. You gotta weigh those calves.

Scott Clawson: Yeah, absolutely.

Dana Zook: It gets exciting. But then also, what are we getting back to? Right? Sure. Sure. Absolutely.

Scott Clawson: So, and one more thing to think about. There's the old saying is like, well, she has a, you know, she's gotta have a calf every year.

I think that is, that's good. But I don't think that's really telling, right? If I've got a cow that calves every year on, let's say the 60th day of my calving interval. Okay. Or maybe it's worse. Maybe it's the 90th day, right? But she has a calf every year, so we're gonna keep her. I would say that that's good, but maybe that doesn't tell the whole story.

When prices are the way they are right now, that's probably good enough, right? She's [00:15:00] still, regardless if that calfs, like whatever we're gonna, we're gonna be profitable in that venture. But when things get tighter and we think about if cow herd, if cow cost is applied equally amongst all our cows, 'cause that's the best we can do now, whatever your number for your ranch cost is applied equally amongst those cows.

That would mean that those cows early in your calving distribution are making the greatest contribution to your bottom line. So if we thought about it this way, maybe those first third would be profitable. That second, that second 21 day period, those might be breakevens in the last 21 days. We might be losing money on those cows even though she's having a calf every year.

So, because if we think about historically how our margins have been thin. That might be enough to tilt us from, from being profitable to unprofitable per cow. And so I would always think about it that way. Just from a [00:16:00] perspective when it comes to culling decisions, et cetera, she having a calf every year is maybe performing her task, but it's not excelling at her task.

And that's really what we want is a bunch of cows that are excelling at their task.

Dana Zook: Right. It may be that they're pulling down that average so far. Mm-hmm. That it's just wrecking the rest of the numbers that are doing really good. I mean, I've heard you talk about that before and so I know that that's so important.

Scott Clawson: Yeah. Yeah. And so having a calf every year at the same date, that's great. As long as it's in the first 21 days.

Dana Zook: If she does that, you know, great. Keep her. But I think from a culling perspective, we always talk about culling during droughts, but this might be a perfect opportunity to identify those cows that are kind of just doing their job. Mm-hmm. But hanging out.

Scott Clawson: That's right. That's right. Absolutely.

Dana Zook: Yeah. So that's, that's a really good note to tie it all with a bow. So Scott as we wrap [00:17:00] up, is there some guidance that you could give to listeners as far as taking advantage of these high prices, maybe not some record keeping things, but just some things as we move into the fall.

What are some things to keep an eye out for?

Scott Clawson: Yeah, so I would say, you know, a bunch of our producers, probably the bulk of our producers were around from 2014 to 15 and, and kind of experienced that, you know, great prices. And then we looked up one day and, and those prices were gone. We do have a different set of tools now just from a risk management perspective to ensure that that doesn't happen to us again.

And so I would strongly encourage folks to be looking at LRP. Especially if you have spring calving cows who are, you're gonna wean calves this fall and sell the shortest policy on LRP is 13 weeks. And while there are some, some grace periods, et cetera, as far as how you sell calves.

But if, if we think about that shortest period being 13 [00:18:00] weeks, we're really getting close to that. Date where it would be perfectly effective for us weaning calves in the fall. Right. So 13 weeks from today, we're getting pretty close to that calf marketing period, or 13 weeks from next week we're that much closer.

So we're, we're getting at a point this summer where and, and actually the article I'm writing right now for a newsletter next month, but we're getting to that period with LRP to where we need to, to pull the trigger on it to get us protected into the fall. And so that's something I would certainly keep in mind.

A lot of producers, you know, we're getting into that kind of retention rebuilding phase with the cow herd. And kind of going on exploring that. We all know that bred heifer prices are, are very, very high right now. Again, there's an LRP policy for that pregnancy or for that unborn calf when you buy that bred.

So it might cost you a few extra dollars, but you know that few extra dollars is really gonna protect [00:19:00] your downside market risk. And, and that's something we, we learned last time is very important for producers. So, I would look at a couple of those things. You know, making sure that that we get an LRP in place if, if price risk is something you're concerned about.

And the other thing I would throw out there is that not every pound on those calves is worth the same. Okay, so, don't assume that just because prices are high that it's going to be beneficial economically to maybe, let's say creep feed calves. I'm trying to go from 550 to 600 pounds or, or whatever.

Don't, don't quote those prices, but those pounds within that period are all worth a different dollar amount. When we get into some of those periods, you might be shocked to find how little some of those pounds are actually worth. And, and then at the flip side of that, how much some of those pounds are, are worth.

So always be keeping an eye on those value of gains as we get into the fall to see, is it, is it [00:20:00] worth chasing another 50 pounds et cetera to put on those calves.

Dana Zook: Very good. Scott, thank you so much. That's a good advice for producers. And I didn't even think about that. LRP being

just very timely right now. Absolutely. Absolutely. Make that decision. Get with your insurance agent. I always say get with your crop insurance agent because many of them sell this as well, but Yep,

Scott Clawson: absolutely.

Dana Zook: Yeah, so consider that. There's lots of 'em out there.

There's a lot of 'em, especially absolutely Northwest Oklahoma. So if you have any questions, listeners about record keeping, please contact Scott or our West District Ag Economist, Alberto Amador. Scott, thanks so much for this information. I.

Scott Clawson: Always Appreci. You're very welcome.

Enjoyed it Dana.

Dana Zook: Many county extension educators are also knowledgeable about some of these topics and, and can move things up the chain if they need some help answering questions. But don't, don't forget about them. They are your local representative for OSU extension in every county.

Thanks for listening folks. I hope you [00:21:00] all have a wonderful midsummers week.