Plan 70%, Leave 30% Flexible

Ron Kuck
Dairy / Livestock Educator
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Jefferson County
Northern NY Regional Ag Team

I found this article from Dr. Kris Ringwall, director of North Dakota State University's Dickinson Research Extension Center. It should be a good follow up from last month's article in NC Advisor "Assessing the Calving Season." In that article I asked cow/calf operators to record their calving distribution to evaluate last year's repro program. We can also use this information today to plan for the unplannable.

A beef producer needs a set of "liquid cattle" – the group that is easy to round up and sell as weather changes, feed becomes short or the labor force changes. Selling this group creates opportunity for the remaining herd by lessening the demands on the operation.

Book 70 percent of your farm with core programs, core cattle, core pastures and forage, and focus the other 30 percent on meeting the issues of the year. Good years: more cattle, more forage, more labor; bad years: fewer cattle, less forage, less labor. This gives you the adaptability that is critical for long-term sustainability.

So it's a good idea to start the grazing season with a plan for which cattle you would sell should summer weather not match expectations. The simplest approach is what I call a "lazy L," a proactive management plan that evaluates cow-calf numbers and determines in advance how many pairs should be turned out to core pasture grass and allows you to plan ahead for easier adjustment to inventory should adjustments be needed.

First, build a calving distribution table from the calving information. Take a sheet of paper and make five columns listing dates when cows calved across the top: first 21 days, second 21 days, third 21 days, and fourth 21 days and late. Then add rows for each age of cow you have in the herd. Now you have a table with all your cow ages down the left-hand side and calving cycle across the top. Complete the table by going to your calving book and marking down each cow in the appropriate box in the table. For example, cow H8220 is a 4-year-old that calved 30 days into the calving season. Place a mark in the 3-year-old row and second 21 days column. Cow G7108 is a 5-year-old that calved 15 days into the calving season and would get marked in the 4-year-old row and first 21 days column. D134 is an 8 year old cow that calved 80 days into the season. She would get marked in the 7 year-old row and fourth 21 day column. When finished, you will have a table that shows the distribution of your current calving season by cow age. This identifies older cows and cows not calving on time.

AGE	FIRST 21 DAYS	SECOND 21 DAYS	THIRD 21 DAYS	FOURTH 21 DAYS	LATE
2					
3		H8220			
4	G7108				
5					
6					
7				D134	
8					

Determine how many “liquid cows” you need to market by drawing a “lazy L.” Adjust the “lazy L” according to need. If the goal is to have 20 percent of the herd as “liquid cows,” then move the “lazy L” up or down until the number of old and or late-calving cows approximates the number of needed “liquid cows. While one is at it, add the wild, poor-mothering or poor-milking cows as well

Lazy L Calving Distribution
Sample Herd Numbers

Age	First 21 days	Second 21 days	Third 21 days	Fourth 21 days	Late
2	84	13	1	0	0
3	37	14	0	4	3
4	31	14	1	1	8
5	25	9	0	5	5
6	19	3	3	1	5
7	7	4	1	1	1
8	18	15	6	4	7
9	10	15	2	3	1
10	2	3	6	0	0
11	20	3	3	0	1
12^+	3	1	0	0	2

An example of proactive management is when a producer evaluates cow-calf numbers and determines in advance how many pairs should be turned out to grass and adjusts the inventory accordingly.

Getting back to where we started, producers need to set up their day with 70 percent planned work and apply the same principle to the operation, with a 70 percent allocation of resources to core programs. By doing so, the day goes better and change is prepared for, more tolerable and less stressful.

And remember to spend 5% of your time keeping your cows and calves healthy and then you won’t have to spend 100% of your time when they’re ill.