



**FOOTHILLS FORAGE
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GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS March 2026

Coordinator's Note—Kayla Giles

Greetings FFGA Members

In late February and early March, 25 FFGA members, fellow Albertans and myself went on the FFGA Agriculture & Sightseeing Tour to Uruguay, a two-week tour exploring international agricultural systems while immersing ourselves in the country's rich culture and history. Partnering with Leader Tours, FFGA has offered these agriculture focused international tours for over 15 years, giving members the unique opportunity to see first hand how farms, research organizations, and agribusiness operate abroad.

Our tour began in Montevideo, where we visited the Asociación Rural del Uruguay, the national organization representing Uruguayan farmers and ranchers. Similar to the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, the Association advocates on policy, trade, and regulations, and supports producers with research, education, and technical resources. This visit offered valuable insights into how Uruguay's agriculture sector is structured and supported.

Next, we toured Granja La Cumbre, a family run dairy farm and artisanal cheese factory. Operated by fifth-generation Swiss Uruguayan farmers, they explained how the quality of the cheese starts with healthy soil and their grass fed cattle. Their operation produces around 400 kg of cheese daily from 4,000 litres of milk, using sustainable pasture dairy practices and hands on cheese production.

We also visited the National Institute of Agricultural Research (INIA), Uruguay's main public agricultural research body. INIA focuses on practical research to support producers, including forage and grazing systems, beef and

sheep production, crop development, and soil health management.

A highlight for myself was visiting El Chasco, a family-owned mixed farm established in 1954. Operating on 15,000 acres, they grow crops similar to Canada: wheat, barley, canola, corn, soybeans, and sunflower and run a few hundred head of cattle and sheep. They practice integrated crop livestock systems to ensure nutrient cycling and sustainability.

We also visited Estancia y Cabaña Loma Azul, a large purebred Hereford and Angus operation in the Florida region. With several hundred cattle and roughly 2,500 sheep, they practice integrated grazing systems as well, allowing sheep and cattle to share pastures. Unlike Canada, foxes are their main predator for young calves and lambs.

We toured Claldy, one of Uruguay's leading dairy processors. Milk is collected daily from farms across the country and processed into cheese, butter, cream, yogurt, and whey powder, much of which is exported to Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.

In the Colonia region, we explored two historic wineries: Bodega Zubizarreta, a family-run artisanal winery founded in 1957, and Los Cerros de San Juan, established in 1854 and recognized as a national heritage site. Both offered a glimpse into Uruguay's long standing winemaking traditions and the connection between agriculture and Latin culture.

We also visited Erro, a major family founded agribusiness operating across Uruguay's agricultural supply chain. Erro is involved in grain production and export, seed and fertilizer sales, agronomy services, livestock feed, and farm management. Erro also deals and services equipment such as New Holland, Case, and MacDon. They manage logistics, trucking, grain elevators, and port access as well, proving how Erro is involved across the entire agricultural supply chain, making it a major competitor to companies like Cargill.

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Another highlight was meeting with a member of a CREA group (Consortios Regionales de Experimentación Agrícola), a farmer led support and knowledge sharing network widely used in Uruguay and Argentina. CREA groups consist of 10–12 farmers who meet monthly to discuss financial and production information, share experiences, and make collective management decisions. This peer to peer learning system helps improve efficiency, profitability, and decision-making, and can be compared to

Ranching for Profit programs in Canada and the USA.

Alongside farm visits, we enjoyed guided sightseeing in Colonia del Sacramento and Montevideo, exploring historic neighborhoods, museums, and cultural landmarks. A free day in Punta del Este allowed us to visit the marina, observe commercial and private fishermen, and even feed scraps to sea lions, a memorable experience for myself.

The FFGA Agriculture & Sightseeing Tour to Uruguay provided a well rounded experience, combining

farm tours, research and industry visits, and cultural exploration. Participants gained firsthand knowledge of livestock and crop systems, dairy and cheese production, wine operations, agribusiness, and farmer led networks, all within the Uruguayan culture. For anyone interested in international agriculture, stay tuned for where we are going next year!

Kayla Giles



On the Cover: FFGA Cows & Corn event at Dave Sammons. Photo: FFGA

Thank you for your support!



One-minute spa treatment can boost calf health



Photo: FFGA

Karyn and Lance Neilsen take a hands-on approach to their animals at calving time, and the newborn calves' experience with the "spa" massage treatment appears to be paying off.

The Neilsens of Stettler, Alta., are part of a three-year study with Olds College to assess the effect of tactile stimulation in newborn calves. A gentle rubbing is thought to mimic maternal stimulation such as licking or grooming.

"It's like petting a dog," said Karyn, who completes each one-minute massage while Lance keeps track on his stopwatch.

"I start at the top of their head and ears and work my way down their body, legs and back end with firm but steady pressure.

"Lots of times they are resistant for the first 10 to 15 seconds, but then they actually settle into it and realize they like it. Lots of times, by the end, their tail is wagging quite happily," she said.

The project is headed by Dr. Désirée Gellatly, a research scientist at the Olds College Technology Access Centre for Livestock Production. She first saw the benefits of hands-on massage in her native Brazil as part of a research group studying ways to improve productivity, health and welfare in Zebu dairy calves.

The Zebu breed is characterized by a fatty hump on the shoulders, a large dewlap and sometimes drooping ears. They tend to be more aggressive and excitable compared to the common cattle breeds of North America and Europe.

"I have been captivated by the idea of how simply improving the welfare of farm animals can significantly enhance the profitability of the livestock industry," said Gellatly.

"The main goal is to reduce the animals' stress levels during future handling occasions and subsequently improve their immune response as well as growth and reproductive performance," she said.

"Can we improve the temperament of

those animals from the day they are born? Can we start doing any strategy to actually change how they permanently perceive humans?"

Besides cleaning, a cow's licking behaviour warms the calf and creates a bond. By stimulating nerve receptors in the skin, the process provides what appears to be a pleasant sensation for the calf.

Early and positive sensory interactions lower secretion of stress hormones, which lowers the fight-or-flight response in adulthood. These changes are permanent, Gellatly said.

"The most sensitive period of brain development in calves is in the first week. We recommend immediately after processing the calves to apply gentle but firm pressure with your hands around the legs, back and areas that the cow would lick," she said.

Some argue that procedures such as tactile stimulation are unnecessary for beef calves because they receive positive stimulation from their mothers through the cow's lick.

However, the goal is to use this period in the calf's brain development to the handler's advantage. "Unfortunately, this window is often overlooked, and interactions with humans are either negative or non-existent, considering some producers only process their calves a few months after birth. This is often because of the mistaken belief that not interacting with the animals at all will reduce their stress levels.

"In reality, given our current understanding of the importance of this critical period, such approaches (negative or non-interaction) could ultimately be detrimental to achieving optimal results," she said.

Karyn Neilsen has seen positive results from her part in the study.

"I think the massage lowers their cortisol levels. So when they are around humans they've had that synapse in their brain that we're not scary and they're going to be calmer because they've had more touch."

Most cows don't seem to mind either, she said.

"The mother is usually right there. Most of our cows are very quiet and calm even after they've just calved. They'll just stand and watch. Sometimes, they get a little upset and we have to chase them back a little bit. But most often they just wait while we finish up with the calf."

All 220 of Neilsens'

calves are weighed, tagged and given selenium and vitamin A and D between 24 and 48 hours after birth. Bull calves are also banded.

As part of the study, half the newborns are given a one minute massage after processing at one day of age and the other half receive no massage.

"We found animals that received this one-minute massage had 20 percent less incidence of health treatments in the first 30 days and were 47 pounds heavier prior to weaning compared with animals that did not receive the massage," said Gellatly.

Lance Neilsen confirmed the superior weight gain in massaged calves.

"We saw quite significant improvements in weight gain (in heifers) while they were on their mother. The ones that were massaged were sick less often and gained weight better.

"We backgrounded them for another two months after weaning and followed their weight gains and their sickness events. And the same thing occurred post weaning."

However, he saw no improved weight gain in steers, which he believed was tied to the pain of banding and castration.

"This year, we're giving them a shot of lidocaine at the time we band them, so we're going to see. We're hoping this fall we'll have a better weight gain on the steers to be more like the heifer weight gain," he said.

The Neilsens are convinced that newborn massage benefits the health of their herd and their bottom line.

"I think it's amazing. It's an easy extra minute to spend with each calf for those benefits. Doesn't cost anything. That's an excellent return on investment," said Karyn.

"It looks like calves are going to be three bucks a pound in the fall, so 47 times \$3. That extra \$150 is a lot of money per calf. We're getting paid pretty well per minute there and not treating as much either. We had less pneumonias and stuff like that. So that also saves money."

Author: William DeKay

Original Article: <https://www.producer.com/livestock/one-minute-spa-treatment-can-boost-calf-health/>

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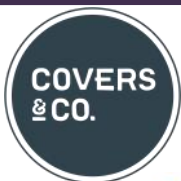
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Beyond Bull Selection: Other Factors Affecting Calf Birth Weights



Photo: FFGA

We have all been there, two in the morning pulling a huge calf out of a cow that really shouldn't have had this problem. The bull had a low birth weight EPD so what went wrong?

Genetic heritability of birth weight accounts for about 45 per cent with the remaining 55 per cent being caused by environmental conditions. The bull plays a smaller part than the cow, with the general rule being that the calf will weigh at birth about seven to eight per cent of its mother's body weight. Larger framed cows will on average have larger calves than more moderate cows.

Long cold winters also impact birth weight. According to a long-term study conducted by the University of Nebraska (Deutscher et al., 1999) the temperature during the last three months of gestation will impact the birth weight. Expect a pound more for each degree below average winter temperature and an increase of calving difficulty by 2.6 percentage points per additional pound. This is because the cow's body keeps more of the blood flow to her core during cold times increasing the nutrients being carried to the calf. The same holds true for summer and fall calving herds as the calves will be smaller due to the blood flow being kept near the extremities to keep the cow cooler.

According to this study many other factors also affect calf birth weight and calving difficulty, including cow age, her weight, body condition, nutrition,

cow pelvic size, genetics, gestation length and calf sex.

A study conducted by the University of Saskatchewan's Western College of Veterinary Medicine analyzed 29,970 full term births from 203 privately owned cow-calf herds across Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Northeastern British Columbia during the 2002 calving season. The lowest risk of calving problems was found in mature cows (5–10 years old), while dystocia increased in twin births, male calves, and calves born earlier in the season (December to February).

One of the key findings from this Canadian field study was that pre-calving body condition score (BCS), measured on a 9 point scale, strongly influenced stillbirth and dystocia risk. After accounting for other risk factors, including assistance at calving, cows with a BCS of 3 or 4 were more likely to have calves dead at or within one hour of birth compared with cows calving at a BCS of 5. Cows with a high BCS (6–7) before calving were more likely to experience severe dystocia than cows calving at BCS 5. A gain in BCS from pregnancy testing to calving was associated with lower odds of dystocia, suggesting that cows on an improving nutritional plane experienced fewer calving difficulties.

This study identified additional stillbirth risk factors: twin pregnancies; retained placenta; uterine prolapse; low precipitation during the previous growing season, which affects forage quality; and early season calving. Using birth records from the previous year, the study found that if a cow or heifer had experienced a difficult birth or a hard pull, her risk of calving issues—including stillbirth—was greatly increased in the following year.

The age of the cow has a profound effect on incidence of calving difficulty. Findings from the Western Canadian study showed that replacement heifers had about 6.5 times the odds of needing assistance compared with ma-

ture cows, while second and third-calving cows had 1.6 and 1.24 times the odds, respectively. For severe dystocia, heifers had 4.6 times the odds of mature cows, with progressively lower risk in second and third parity cows. Stillbirth risk was also higher in both first calf heifers and cows over 10 years of age compared with mature cows.

Pelvic size also matters. Gene Deutscher, extension beef specialist with the University of Nebraska, authored Beef Handbook Bulletin BCH 2130, Pelvic Measurements for Reducing Calving Difficulty. He stated, "Calving difficulty results in a major economic loss to beef producers."

Large framed cows tend to have wider pelvic areas but also carry proportionately heavier calves, which offsets any advantage. Selecting a cow on size alone seems ineffective. Heifers with small pelvic areas have an 85 per cent difficulty rate compared to those with larger pelvises. He recommends obtaining pelvic measurements before breeding; a 600-pound heifer should have a pelvis that measures at least 11 centimeters wide and 12 centimeters high to deliver a 63-pound calf.

Calving difficulty increases calf death loss, cow mortality, labor and veterinary costs. It delays the return of estrus to cows and reduces conception rates. It also results in lower calf weaning weights and market values from breeding young heifers to easy calving bulls to reduce calving difficulty. Studies have shown that calf losses of four per cent within 24 hours for unassisted births jump to 16 per cent for calves requiring birth assistance. As producers select bulls for more growth, larger calves at birth and more calving difficulties can be expected.

"Gestation lengths also affect the calf size in the last few days of the gestation," says Rolland Kramer, D.V.M., Stockman's Veterinary Clinic in North Platte, Nebraska. "A calf will gain be-

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(continued from page 6)

tween a pound and a pound and half a day, so just a couple of days will add five pounds to the calf. There are gestation length variations between cattle breeds and also within breeds. Gestation length is a maternal trait, cows that tend to calve early will pass that trait onto their daughters.”

He also mentioned fetal programming studies showing the impact maternal nutrition has long-term on the calf, both for replacement heifers and even how the feeder carcass will yield. A cow’s body condition score especially in early gestation makes a huge difference on the calf.

A Beef Cattle Handbook bulletin (BCH-2120), authored by Harlan D. Ritchie of Michigan State University and Peter T. Anderson of the University of Minnesota, cited a long-term study with a group of Hereford cows that were moved from Miles City, Montana to Brooksville, Florida and the Florida herd was moved to Montana. Ten years later the birth weights of the Montana herd that had been moved south had declined from 81 pounds to 64 pounds. The birth weights of the relocated Florida herd increased from 66 pounds to 77 pounds. This supported other studies that calves of comparable genotypes will be born lighter in the south than in the north.

Kalyn Waters, former SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist, in Factors Affecting Birth Weight (3/25/2013) said restricting maternal nutrition to decrease birth weight is not a sound management practice. Extreme feed reductions such as feeding less than 70 per cent of the cow’s nutritional requirements will result in a smaller calf but increases calving problems as the cows are too weak and undernourished to deliver the calf and her milk supply and quality are greatly affected.

Pete Anderson, Extension Beef Cattle Specialist, authored a paper for the University of Minnesota Extension: Minimizing Calving Difficulty in Beef Cattle (2012). His conclusions are: “Mate virgin heifers and small cows to bulls that will sire small

calves. Feed heifers well enough to weigh at least 85 per cent of their expected mature weight at first calving. Use pelvic measurements and do not retain daughters of cows that have a record of calving difficulty. Begin breeding heifers 21 to 30 days earlier than cows so they can be observed, and feed late in the day. Record a calving ease score for all calves that are observed at birth.”

Purebred producers record birth weight and calving ease on their calves which is something commercial producers might also implement for their own records. Our goal as beef

cattle producers is to have unassisted births and a high breed back ratio so considering all the factors affecting calf birth weight is important in our business.

Author: Deanna Nelson-Licking

Original Article: [https://](https://abpdaily.com/checking-in-with-abp/beyond-bull-selection-other-factors-affecting-calf-birth-weights/)

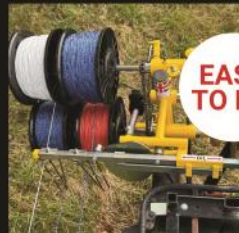
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5 Ways to Improve Stocker Average Daily Gain

Photo: FFGA



If you run a stocker or back-grounding operation, you already know how important cattle gain is to the profitability and long-term sustainability of your business.

Small optimizations to pasture management and cattle health programs can work together to improve stocker weight gain this year. Sam Ingram, a range and pasture field scientist with Corteva Agriscience, and Dr. Jeffrey Sarchet, a beef technical services veterinarian with Zoetis, put their heads together to offer their five top suggestions for improving stocker average daily gain (ADG):

1. Prioritize valuable legumes by using effective pasture weed control strategies.

Every stocker operation is highly dependent on quality forage to maximize profit margins. If forage production is the goal, any plant that isn't adding to the forage production in that pasture is competing with the other forage species that are. That's why pasture weed control is one of the primary tactics to consider when trying to optimize pasture production and ultimately, ADG.

"When the quality of the legume is so high in total digestible nutrients and crude protein, you're able to boost average daily gain in a really economical way," Ingram says.

2. Prevent and control bovine respiratory disease (BRD).

BRD can significantly reduce gain in cattle and is a devastating disease for both cattle and producers,

costing the industry up to \$1 billion annually in lost production, increased labor, treatment costs and death.

"To help reduce losses from respiratory disease, it is important to implement control measures before it hits your operation," Sarchet says. "A strategic on-arrival vaccination program can quickly provide protection from harmful BRD pathogens and give cattle a healthy start. When cattle are at increased risk of BRD, I also recommend using a broad-spectrum antimicrobial on arrival as part of an effective BRD control program."

3. Implement a strategic deworming program.

If cattle are grazing, there is always a risk of exposure to internal parasites. A parasite control program is critical for stocker cattle to fully utilize nutrients in forage and achieve maximum weight gain.

"Parasites drain the immune system," Sarchet says. "With the younger age of stocker cattle and the potential for higher risk of BRD, any boost to the immune system is beneficial. Parasites not only affect the immune system — they also suppress appetite and limit optimum gain."

4. Consider implanting.

Typically, conventional growth implants increase cattle weight gain by 15 to 40 lb. during the grazing season. In current cattle markets, this can translate into an additional \$53 to \$143 per head for producers.

"Implants are an amazing technology because they essentially make the animal more efficient," Sarchet says. "You can graze the same number of cattle on the same amount of nutritious pasture and produce even more beef."

5. Consult local experts.

There are many variables and

practices that can contribute to more forage and pounds of beef produced per acre, even in addition to those listed above. But Ingram and Sarchet emphasize that each operation is unique, with different management practices already in place.

"Corteva Agriscience and Zoetis offer robust portfolios of products that can help improve ADG, but both companies are invested in your operation's success," Ingram says. "Our teams of local experts are committed to sharing the latest and greatest knowledge in stocker cattle management and working with you to find the right mix of strategies and solutions to improve your margins."

In addition to working with these in-field experts, it's important to frequently consult your local veterinarian and nutritionist.

"I really admire stocker producers, because you have to wear two hats — you have to stay on your toes and keep a sharp pencil in both the forage production and cattle production aspects," Sarchet says. "We deal more with the animal health side of it at Zoetis, but I spend a lot of time also talking with producers about growing good grass. It all goes together, and it really doesn't work when it's piecemealed. The benefits are proven to be additive."

Author: Drovers

Original Article: <https://www.drovers.com/news/beef-production/5-ways-improve-stocker-average-daily-gain>

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Relay	Grazing, Haylage, Silage	50% Crusader Italian Ryegrass, 20% Hairy Vetch, 15% Hunter Leaf Turnip, 15% Forage Rape	12-15 lb/acre add 40-50 lb cereal and 10+lbs forage peas
Swath Grazing	Grazing, Swath Grazing	35% Goliath Forage Rape, 35% Hunter leaf turnip, 30% Green Globe Turnip	5-7 lb/acre add 50-60 lb cereal and 10+lbs forage peas
Double Down	Grazing, Haylage, Silage	66% Winter Triticale, 10% Yellow Blossom Sweet Clover, 10% Forage Rape, 7% Red Clover, 5% Hairy Vetch, 2% Chicory	30-40 lb/acre
Ultimate	Grazing, Haylage	30% Crusader Italian Ryegrass, 30% Hairy Vetch, 10% Crimson Clover, 10% Forage Rape, 10% Hunter Leaf Turnip, 10% Graza Radish	10-12 lb/acre add 30-40 lb cereal and 10+lbs forage peas
Perennial Forage Blend	Harvest Method	Composition	Seeding Rate
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