



**FOOTHILLS FORAGE
AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION**

Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture

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GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS

April 2022

Manager's Note - Laura Gibney

Hello,

The start of 2021 found us still in the depth of pandemic lockdowns and isolation. Coming out of a Christmas without all the big gatherings, friends, group celebrations and headed into the start of the New Year with the prospect of online home-schooling certainly isn't a time I look back on fondly. However, we persevered and got through those long weeks too. Like many people I spent more time with my family, enjoying more time with my husband and our 4 and 7-year-old daughters; we spent time gardening, bike riding, riding horses, playing board games, and exploring our favorite local hidden gems like Sandy McNabb, Blue Rock Wildlands, Kananaskis Lakes, Mesa Butte and more.

At this point FFGA had made the challenging shift to online extension and continued to offer informative and pertinent information through 19 webinars with 2,774 registrants in 2021. All of FFGA's webinars are recorded and can be found on our website at:

www.foothillsforage.com. As spring came, we started to see things open up and restrictions lift. Over the summer and into the fall and winter we held 6 in-person events with an attendance of 276 producers. We found that people were excited and eager to get out to learn and network again. The Restriction's Exemption Program that came into place in the fall affected attendance numbers, however we continued to offer both online and in-person

extension options. Despite the continuation of challenging times, we offered informative programming throughout the year.

In the fall, as Sonja's pregnancy progressed, we brought on Kayla Minor who mentored into the Environmental & Communicators Coordinator role. Sonja left FFGA at Christmas time for maternity leave with the arrival her first child, Robert, in late January. In 2021 FFGA assisted 35 producers with their Environmental Farm Plans as well as continuing to publish our monthly newsletter and reach our 2,403 followers on Facebook and 1,324 on Twitter.

Many will remember the growing season of 2021 not only for how dry it was but how hot and smoky it was. The heat and lack of moisture affected most of the province to varying degrees. It was a year that well managed pastures and rangeland were visible as they seemed to fair better than most during the dry times. The fall brought high hay prices and saw many down graded crops, crop regrowth and residues integrated into use for livestock feed. This innovative shift created opportunities as well as challenges with providing livestock water, fencing, and concerns with proper nutrition and toxicities. FFGA fielded many phone calls through our Agronomist Specialist program as well as highlighting some of these topics through webinars, events, and articles. The winter was relatively mild and dry in our area other than the terrible cold snap over Christmas. As we move into spring, we pray from some much needed moisture to get the season off to a good start.

At FFGA we have several different grants and projects on the go that come together in the delivery of our full program. The balancing of a wider variety of funds and projects comes at an administrative cost but has also enabled us to access more revenue streams. We have been primary partners in the application for an Alberta Living Lab and are collaborators on the rollout of the recently announced Canadian Rotational

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Grazing Mentorship Program as well as the On-Farm Climate Action Fund which will see dollars reaching producers for on-farm initiatives related to nitrogen cycling, cover cropping, and grazing management in 2022 and 2023. We look forward to our roll in these Canada wide initiatives while working with local producers on the ground in our region.

As we moved into 2022, we foraged ahead with many in-person and online events. As we see the pandemic loosening its hold and the hopeful return to normal FFGA is ramping up for a big year of events, field days, soil sampling and more. We move into 2022 with some programs and funding that have been pushed forward from the past couple of years due to covid limitations. FFGA is

moving into a purposeful growth period as we see some local, provincial, and federal opportunities presenting themselves.

We continue to deliver innovative, regenerative, and pertinent agriculture information to our members through workshops, conferences, field days, webinars, our monthly newsletter, and social media platforms. As always, I very much enjoy working with the innovative and passionate producers through the FFGA membership and board. It has been a welcome change getting back to in-person board meetings where the energy and ideas flow and create an atmosphere of excitement for the future. Thank you to all of our members and partners for staying connected through another trying year. I have very much enjoyed re-

connecting with many of you in person and doing more of that in the coming months!

Stay connected for another great year,

Laura Gibney
FFGA Manager



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On the Cover: FFGA Pasture Management Workshop; 1973

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ROCKY VIEW COUNTY



Good calving data can deliver dollars, but first you need to record it



There is a lot of information that can be collected during calving season. But what data is worth spending time recording? And why should we be collecting data to begin with?

A bare-bones record — such as how many cows and how many calves they had — doesn't get you very far if you're looking to improve management practices and monitor changes, said Dr. Jennifer Pearson, an assistant professor at the University of Calgary's faculty of veterinary medicine.

"Without appropriate data and writing numbers down, it's hard to answer (herd performance) questions," she said.

The top three records that producers are recording are date of birth, calf identification number, and calving ease score. Only 44 per cent of western Canadian producers collected birth weight and fewer than five per cent collected information such as calf sex, coat colour, dam udder score and temperament.

"If we don't write information down, when we look at the numbers at the end of the season, they (the numbers) might be underestimating what is actually happening," Pearson said. "They might be masking a problem we are having."

And if you want to drive herd performance to the next level, you can't just have vague goals, she said, adding she recommends a method called SMART (which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time based).

"When we want to make a goal to improve something we want to follow this 'SMART' protocol," she said during a recent Beef Cattle Research Council webinar.

"It has to be specific. We can't just say, 'I want to improve calf health.'"

So, again, what data should producers be collecting and what should be done with it?

First, start collecting information prior to calving, beginning with preg checking.

"By recording which cows are pregnant or which are open, we can calculate an appropriate number and determine

how we are sitting compared to our benchmark number," Pearson said.

A producer can then assess if the number of cows and heifers bred is acceptable or if there's an issue that needs more investigation.

During the calving season, keep track of the number of cows and heifers that have dystocia, that is, a difficult or prolonged birth.

"If we aren't keeping track of which calves were assisted then we don't know if we have an issue or not," Pearson said.

Keeping track of treatment for disease of pre-weaned calves is particularly helpful, especially if a producer is dealing with scours or respiratory-type diseases. Also tracking pre-weaning mortality for both heifers and cows is beneficial (as is keeping records of the number of stillborn calves).

"Most calves, if they are going to die within that pre-weaning period, are going to die within the first day or two of life," she said.

How you record data also matters, with most western Canadian producers relying on calving notebooks or paper records.

Mark Hoimyr started with a pocket-sized calving record book but it wasn't long before he was using a spreadsheet.

"I liked the ability to manipulate some of the numbers and to summarize some of the things that were happening, so I migrated once again to a database," said the rancher from Gladmar, Sask.

But transcribing numbers from the calving book, typically done in the evenings, was time consuming, and errors would occur now and then.

"It got to be a little more than I felt was worth it," said Hoimyr. "We needed something simpler."

So he started using a spreadsheet on his smartphone.

"We've been using it for 10 years now, and it's evolved over time, but we really like it."

The app he uses has a particular feature he likes — being able to hide unneeded columns (such as when calves are weaned) so it's easy to see the document on the phone's small screen. Not only does his spreadsheet show the view that he needs at the time, but he has set it up to be really quick to enter data in the field after the calf has been tagged: "About 30 to 45 seconds," he said.

Hoimyr also pre-enters his cows into the spreadsheet prior to

calving along with some pre-sets such as polled (as the majority of his herd is Angus based) and calving ease.

"We expect most of our calves to come without issue," he said, adding he can easily override the pre-set if the birth is difficult or the calf has horns.

But it's whatever works for you that matters, said Pearson.

"There's nothing wrong with keeping paper records only," she said. "It's harder though to have immediate results when you are looking at paper records only."

Using spreadsheets is easier than hand calculating numbers, and allows for more in-depth analysis. Pearson noted the Beef Cattle Research Council has numerous tools and calculators to help producers take their numbers and punch them in to see how they compare to a benchmark for their area or region.

For example, one called the 'Cow-Calf Production Indicators Calculator' only requires producers to enter 15 numbers (such as the conception rate, live calves born, death loss and weaning weight) and then instantly compares those key indicators to the corresponding benchmark for Western Canada. (This and other calculators can be found at www.beefresearch.ca — go to Resources and then Decision Making Tools.

Next comes the most crucial step of all — actually using the data to drive change and improvement.

"Why take the time to write something down if you aren't going to look at the numbers and use them?" Pearson asked.

For example, keeping track of birth weights helps not only track EPDs (expected progeny differences) for purebred cattle, it can also be used for calculating ADG (average daily gain), and it's also useful at looking at neonatal death problems like dystocia.

Start small, and gradually add to it, said Pearson.

With data at your fingertips, you'll also make better decisions, she added.

"Relying on our memory isn't always the best, especially when we are trying to make management decisions."

Author: Jill Burkhardt

Original Article: <https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/livestock/good-calving-data-can-deliver-dollars-but-first-you-need-to-record-it/>

Cow Nutrition Considerations at Calving and Early Lactation



During any given production year on the ranch, cows/heifers are faced with nutritional and environmental stressors. They have periods of high and low nutritional demands. Knowing the stress periods that can result in nutrient deficiencies is where you, the rancher, must manage to your and your ranch's best ability to help the cow/heifer meet these nutritional challenges. How well do you know your ranch? Does it have any advantages or shortcomings that you can utilize or need to augment to affordably meet any nutritional challenges? Some examples of advantages could be wet meadows, irrigated pasture, dryland annuals, windbreaks, proximity to crop residue, etc.

What can you afford? Realizing that you cannot always afford to meet the cow's nutrient requirements will help you in your nutritional plan, i.e., put body condition on your cows when their energy requirements are the lowest (Fig. 1), and let the cow use that body condition as an energy source when you cannot afford to meet her requirements. Feed costs are a major expense for any cow/calf operation. As such, knowing what type of supplement is needed, when it is needed, and how to compare supplements based on nutrient content will help you make better decisions on needed supplement purchases.

Another important question is, "What are the cow effects of your management?" Do you have dystocia problems? Are you

managing your cowherd so that the cows are rebreeding every year? Are you managing to the genetics of your herd? Are your pastures/forages sustaining from year-to-year? A final question to ask is, "What are the calf effects of your management of the dam?" When calves are born are they vigorous and able to get up and suckle the dam? Are the cows producing sufficient colostrum? Is there sickness in your calves? What are your weaning weights? Questions like these can help in your management to ensure that you have healthy calves and cows that have a calf every year.

Body condition scores (BCS) describe the relative fatness of a cow through the use of a nine-point scale. Body condition scoring is an effective management tool to evaluate the nutritional status of the herd. For a spring calving herd, the key times to BCS your gestating females are late summer (early wean if needed), fall, weaning, 45 days after weaning, and 90 days before calving (your last opportunity to economically put condition on your cows/heifers). The most economical time to put condition on thin cows is after weaning. Ninety days before calving is the last opportunity to put condition on cows economically. If possible, sort thin and adequate condition scores into different feeding groups. This will help develop a feeding plan that will maintain cows in adequate body condition or will provide needed weight gain for thin cows prior to and through the breeding season. Having an inventory of your feed on hand for both quantity and quality will help you with your feeding and supplement decisions. Testing your feedstuffs will enable you to have a more strategic feeding program and you will be able to prioritize your quality feedstuffs to younger and thinner females.

By looking at Figure 1, we see that the cow's highest energy requirement is at peak milk production, about 60 days after calving. This coincides with the breeding season. She has calved, is producing milk, is recovering from calving, and getting ready for breeding. To help prepare your mature cows for this, having them in a body condition score (BCS) of at least 5 at calving is recommended. The heifer is still growing, and it is recommended that she be in a BCS of 6 at calving. Separating heifers from the mature cows in the herd should be done at least three weeks prior

to calving. First-calf heifers decrease their daily dry matter intakes by 17 percent in the three weeks prior to calving. Feeding an energy and protein dense diet to heifers is necessary to compensate for this reduced intake at calving.

In late gestation the energy requirements of a mature, 1,200 lb cow are relatively low (9–11 lb total digestible nutrients or TDN per day, 2 lb crude protein per day). As that cow grazes dormant range or low-quality forages, supplementation of 2–2.5 lb of a 20–25 percent crude protein (CP) source would meet the cow's maintenance demands at this stage of production. As a mature cow enters calving and lactation, her protein and energy requirements increase. A lactating cow at peak lactation (60–80 days postpartum) has an energy demand of 15–16 lb of TDN per day. There is a shift in the cow's first limiting nutrient from protein to energy.

Body condition of beef cows that calve in the spring influences productivity of the herd. As body condition of a cow increases at calving for March calving cows, the interval from calving to the first estrus, known as the postpartum anestrus interval, is reduced (Table 1). Thin (BCS 4 or less) cows are slower to rebreed after calving compared to cows in moderate body condition.

As you consider the nutrition requirements of your cows and heifers, keep in mind that their requirements change depending on their stage of production. Using body condition scoring will help you

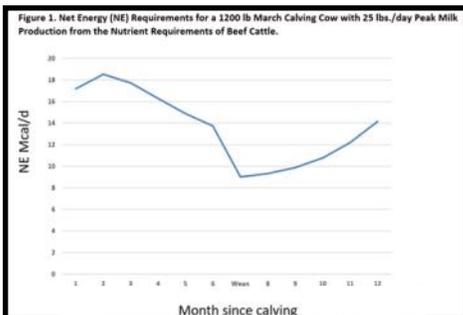
Table 1. Body condition relates to the average interval from calving to first heat after calving.

BCS	PPI, days
3	88.5
4	69.7
5	59.4
6	51.7
7	30.6

Adapted from Houghton et al. (1990)

evaluate the nutritional status of your herd. Keep in mind that how you manage these nutritional requirements can not only have cow effects but also calf effects.

Original Article: <https://www.drovers.com/news/industry/cow-nutrition-considerations-calving-and-early-lactation>



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Spring Grazing Management: How Early Is Too Early?



Photo: Sonja Bloom

Ahh, spring. The time when the grass starts popping up, the leaves begin to emerge on the trees. Naturally, this time of year is tough to resist the urge to turn cows out onto pasture, particularly if you're running low on feed. But is it really a good time to turn cows out just by the fact that the pastures are starting to turn green.

The short of the answer is that no, it's not.

That first blade of grass that begins to emerge from winter dormancy is a result of the remaining energy stores from over the winter months. That first leaf that shows up means that the plant from last year has spent most of its energy stores. Grazing that first leaf now could be very detrimental to that plant, and thus the entire pasture.

The first leaf is the one that begins photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is how plants get their energy, and it will be how that grass plant will slowly start to refill their root energy reserves, but not before they use that energy to put up even more leaves. More leaves mean more photosynthesis which means more energy captured for more growth.

Allowing animals to graze those first emerging leaves sets those plants back far enough that they must draw from more energy reserves that may very well be mostly depleted. Roots are not likely to develop as big and robust as they should, instead of becoming smaller and weaker as new leaves are grown.

Shallow and weak roots predispose plants to become much more sensitive to dry conditions to where they are more likely to shut down and go into dormancy much earlier in the year. They are unable to find more water and nutrients than what they can already reach with their roots, thus become stressed. This has an impact on their health in a way that makes them more prone to insect pests and disease.

Regrowth, therefore, will be slowed significantly, such that there may be less pasture forage available for the rest of the year, and such that the amount of time available on pasture is going to be significantly reduced. Typically, for every day early that animals are turned out to pasture is three days sacrificed for late summer or fall grazing.

So, when is the best time to turn cows out to pasture? My piece of advice is to go by the number of leaves that are on most grass plants in the pasture, not the height of the sward. I know a lot of other publications tell folks to start grazing at anywhere from 6 inches to 10 inches tall, but they tend to ignore the different characteristics that various grass species have that don't follow that kind of textbook advice. For example, Smooth Brome (Bromus inermis) grows taller than Western Wheatgrass (*Pascopyrum smithii*). By the time that smooth brome is "ready to graze" at, say 8 inches tall, western wheatgrass is already putting up a seed-head, and well past that "ready to graze" time.

Therefore, the best time to begin grazing in the spring is when plants have reached the 3 to 3.5 leaf stage.

The actual amount of time it takes for plants to get to that stage depends on previous management, moisture conditions, particular species being grazed, and other factors. Usually, if spring is quite dry, or if plants are coming from a previous year where they were stressed from overgrazing, drought conditions, and/or insects, it will take longer than what may be considered "normal" for the area. As a result, grazing may need to be deferred at least 2 to 4 weeks later than normal.

Plants tend to shut down early when stressed, and therefore need to draw on root reserves for a longer period of time. Plants not given adequate biological time to recover will decline in health and productivity, which eventually may lead to death. This loss may not be noticeable during the time where drought or overgrazing is clearly evident, but it may certainly show up come the following spring.

This is why giving those plants the rest they need to recover is so crucial. Time for recovery really is the cheapest rejuvenation strategy in a person's pasture toolkit and should be used on a regular basis.

That new spring regrowth, though, is going to have to be managed to guarantee a productive stand throughout the year. Plants in the spring will need to be grazed lightly where only one-third to one-quarter of the plants—basically a single bite—is taken. This can only be achieved when you mob graze your animals—some may call it "rotational grazing"—not with continuous grazing systems. Taking that one bite then quickly moving the animals from one paddock to another will leave plenty of green "solar panel" behind for a fast recovery period.

Grazing too heavily—such as taking more than half—means longer times for plants to recover. Grazing heavily all the time plays a heavy toll on the year's forage yield and productivity. Basically, the harder you graze the less grass will come back.

How long to let the plants rest after the first bout of grazing really does depend on factors such as moisture and how much was removed. Typically a rest period of 21 to 30 days is sufficient but expect longer if too much was taken or the rains haven't arrived yet.

A good rule of thumb for grazing is to graze fast when the plants are growing fast, and graze slow when plants are growing slow. Fast-growing plants need shorter rest periods than slow-growing grass.

If you're short on feed and have no choice but to turn cows out to pasture, consider supplementing with grain and/or pellets or cubes to give the cows an additional feed source other than just the pasture plants, and alleviates a bit of the grazing pressure. Creep feeding calves is also recommended if pastures are short, as doing so takes the pressure off the cows to meet their calves' needs when milk may be in short supply. Calves can be started on a creep ration as early as a few weeks of age. Having a sacrifice area for the animals may also be needed until pastures are ready.

All in all, grazing too early is when grasses are just starting to emerge. Waiting a bit longer can yield some good results later on. Really, if you look after the grass, the grass will look after you.

Author: Karin Lindquist

Original Article: <https://praisetheruminant.com/foragesgrasslandsruminants/spring-grazing-management-how-early-is-too-early>

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We would like to thank Rod Vergouwen and Marcel Busz for their time, and work on the FFGA Board

Mission: Assisting producers in profitably improving their forages and regenerating their soils through innovation and education.

Vision: We envision a global community that respects and values profitable forage production and healthy soils as our legacy for future generations.

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