Have you ever stopped and thought about the reasons why you manage your cattle herd the way you do? Can you justify your calving season? You could calve in the spring and market calves in the fall. Or maybe you calve in the fall and market in the spring. Perhaps you have a continuous calving season throughout the year.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A CALVING SEASON
I’m not going to try to convince you that you should be using one calving season over another.

Story continues on next page
There are endless things to consider when you are looking at how and when to market your yearling cattle, including:

- Nutritional demands.
- Forage availability.
- Seasonality of yearling calf prices.
- Seasonality of feed prices.
- Availability of labor.

In the Southern Great Plains, a spring calving season is most popular option, seconded by a fall calving season.

A continuous calving season has been shown to have more issues with management and marketing. Having a group of yearling calves that are larger and uniform in size and color have been shown to increase marketability.

SPRING CALVING SEASON REDUCES SUPPLEMENTATION

In Oklahoma, forage availability and nutrient requirements are among the top factors, outside of yearling cattle and feed prices, influencing timing of a calving season.

A cow’s peak nutrition requirement is going to be shortly after that calf is born. If this is in the fall, there is a good chance that more supplemental feeding will be needed in order for her to provide for the calf and be ready in time for the next breeding season. This is going to increase her annual cost. However, if she calves in the spring, she may need less supplementation with the availability of new forage growing.

While this may seem like an obvious choice, we have to look at the other factors.

FALL CALVING SEASON OFFERS HIGHER MARKET PRICES

By looking at an indexed price for yearling steers weighing 500 to 600 pounds (shown in the chart), we can see that having a calf of this size has a higher price in the spring compared to the fall. This is influenced by multiple factors, including more calves going to the market in the fall due to more spring-calving herds in this part of the country. This increase in supply pushes prices lower.

This causes a trade-off between the two management styles. The higher prices received by the spring yearling calves is offset by the higher management costs for that fall calving herd. The lower prices received in the fall are made up by having lower cow costs with the spring calving herd. This is why it’s important to look at your entire operation and consider the other factors, like available labor or even the weather in your area.

There are trade-offs between all management decisions you face. Understanding the seasonality of the cattle markets is just one of the pieces to the much larger puzzle of producing cattle.