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Volume 10, Issue 2

April 2021

Dear Great Lakes Grazier,

In January of this year, I sent out an invitation for all of you to attend a webinar focused on baled silages presented by Dr. Wayne Coblenz. Dr. Coblenz is a researcher at the USDA ARS U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center in Madison, Wisconsin. Baled silages have become a very popular method for producing high quality forage for beef cattle in recent years. There are many grassfed beef producers are using this method to harvest hay and have found it extremely valuable.

If you were unable to attend this webinar, or would like to watch it again for a refresher, there is good news. All of the archived webinars can be found at: <https://www.ars.usda.gov/midwest-area/madison-wi/us-dairy-forage-research-center/archives/presentations/>. Dr. Coblenz's presentation took place on January 20, 2021. To access the recording, click on the title. If you choose, the presentation can be downloaded and saved to your computer for later viewing.

The link to the recordings is not the only good news headed your way; grazing season is right around the corner. Remember the old saying: "April Showers bring May flowers," or in our case, GREEN GRASS! Do your best to increase your level of grazing management this season, and if you have questions, reach out to me, or your peers that are doing a good job. We are all here to see that you succeed in making this year better than last. You get to decide what "better" means for your farm.

Let us do our best to make 2021 a great year; make it the year that you make changes for the better on your farm!

Kable Thurlow
MSUE Beef & Grazing Educator



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2021 Michigan Bull Breeding Soundness Exam Clinics

The MSU Beef Extension Team will once again be organizing regional Bull Breeding Soundness Exam Clinics. By identifying potential male fertility problems, producers are able to reduce the risk of a less than optimum breeding season. The MSUE Beef Team encourages you to have BSE conducted on your breeding bulls every year. Contact your veterinarian or take advantage of the following Breeding Soundness Exam Clinics organized by MSUE. Cost is \$60-75 per bull when done at one of the MSUE clinics. (price is dependent on bull number/location) **To schedule an appointment at one of these BSE clinics, please call the appropriate contact person as soon as possible.** All Clinics start at 9:00 a.m. unless otherwise noted.

Location: Gary Voogt Farm 2831 Hayes St. Marne, MI
Date: Friday, March 12, 2021
Contact: Kevin Gould @ 616-443-2956 or Gary Voogt @ 616-862-4158
Dr. Jackie Ponstein West Michigan Vet Services 616-837-8151

Location: Wernette Cattle Company, 9144 50TH AVE, Remus MI
Date: Saturday, April 17, 2021
Contact: Kevin Gould @ 616-443-2956 or Dr. Kevin Todd 231-832-3680 Country Vet

Location: West Branch Stockyards, 1673 Fairview Road, West Branch, MI
Date: Saturday, April 24, 2021
Contact: Phil Durst @ 989-387-5346 Veterinarian: Dr. Bryce Slavik

Location: Stamper Farm, 10950 Bailey Drive, Harrison, MI 48625
Date: Saturday, May 1, 2021 9:00 a.m.
Contact: Kable Thurlow @ (989)802-3384 Veterinarian: Dr. Bryce Slavik

Location: Western Upper Peninsula
Date: Late April – Early May, 2021
Contact: Frank Wardynski @ 989-281-0918
or Dr. Renee Coyer, Upper Peninsula Vet Services @ 906-513-1356

Location: Eastern and Central Upper Peninsula
Date: By Appointment
Contact: Dr. Renee Coyer, Upper Peninsula Vet Services @ 906-513-1356

**The MSU College of Veterinary Medicine regularly schedules in house appointments for BSEs.
To schedule an appointment, contact the MSU CVM Large Animal Clinic at 517-353-9710.**

Spring turn-out sets the tone for the entire grazing season

By Kim Cassida and Kable Thurlow

When the grass starts greening, the urge to get cattle on pasture is strong. However, patience and a little planning will pay off because management of the spring flush of forage availability is key to setting the tone for the entire grazing season. Rotational stocking systems are the most important tool producers have to manage forage growth and supply throughout the season, but these require some forethought for effective use.

First, a little plant physiology is in order. Most perennial pasture species in Michigan are in the cool-season functional group which typically breaks dormancy in late March through April, depending on location in Michigan. In most species, the first growth comes from reproductive buds that were formed the previous fall and is fueled by sugars, nitrogen, and minerals stored from the previous growing season. Legumes mostly store their reserves in below ground structures like crowns or rhizomes, while grasses store reserves in the lower part of stems. Grasses only store reserves below ground if rhizomes are present in species such as smooth brome grass, tall fescue, reed canarygrass, and Kentucky bluegrass. Consequently, grazing grasses too early can reduce productivity because cattle will tend to graze the lower stem when nothing else is available.

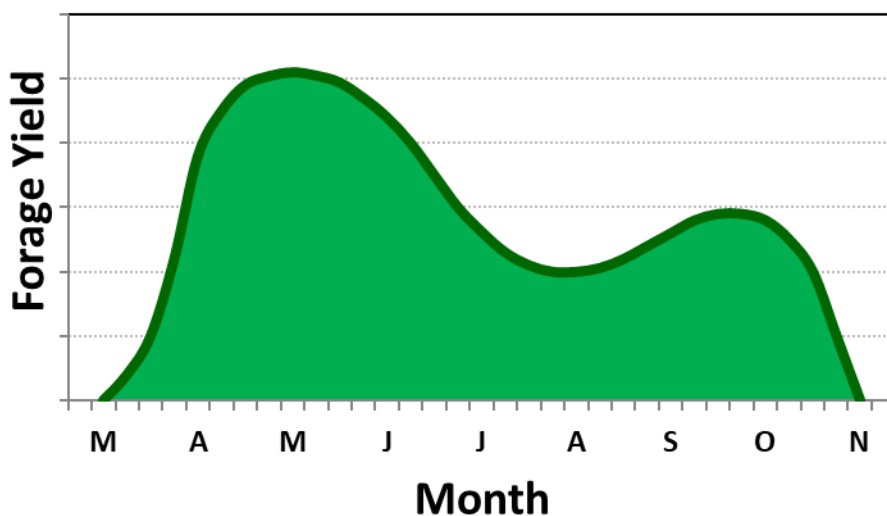


Figure 1. Forage growth over the growing season.

Grasses exhibit explosive growth in spring due to the dominance of reproductive tillers. This is what causes the “spring flush” of growth (Figure 1). This uneven growth over the season can have several negative consequences. Spring forage production often exceeds the ability of available cattle to consume it. As seed heads develop, forage availability per acre increases but nutritional value decreases because of the high proportion of less digestible stem tissue relative to highly digestible leaves. Shading from heavy spring growth can reduce establishment of frost-seeded legumes. Lastly, shading and the presence of reproductive tillers in many grasses also

suppresses development of new buds and reduces the ability of the paddock to recover quickly after grazing.

It is easy to find recommendations to delay grazing spring pastures until grass is 8 to 10 inches tall. Under [continuous stocking systems](#) this may help protect grass from overgrazing. In rotational stocking systems, waiting this long will almost certainly guarantee that grasses are in the exponential growth phase and most paddocks will be too mature by the time cattle get to them. A better strategy is to begin grazing before you think the paddocks are ready, perhaps when grass averages only 4 to 6 inches tall. At this stage of growth, cattle should be rotated rapidly through the paddocks (no longer than 24 hours per paddock, perhaps as short as 8 to 12 hours), taking only the tops. As grass growth accelerates, this will help keep grass vegetative and stage regrowth over time for subsequent grazing cycles. Rapid rotation also helps reduce pugging damage in the event of the wet spring soils that are so common in Michigan. Paddock grazing sequence should be planned so that paddocks that were grazed last in the fall are given extra spring rest, and not grazed early in spring. A different paddock should be grazed first each year.

Temporarily increasing stocking rate by adding extra cattle, such as stockers, to pastures can help utilize the extra growth expected in spring. If this is not practical for the operation, then plan to set aside some paddocks to accumulate forage once the cattle can no longer keep up. It is better to allow a few paddocks to get over-mature than to fall behind on all of them. The set-aside paddocks can be harvested as hay or baleage or used as a standing forage stockpile for summer grazing by animals with low nutritional needs. Over-mature paddocks can also be machine-clipped to induce regrowth and improve forage quality if the extra cost is justified by the animals being grazed.

Ideally, all soil testing with subsequent recommended lime, P, or K applications was done last fall. If not, this can be also done in the spring as early as you can drive on the pasture or after any grazing cycle if spring soil is too wet. Nitrogen, however, should not be applied to pastures before the first grazing in spring. Applying spring nitrogen is a strong driver of plant growth and simply pours gas on the problem of more forage than cattle can eat during the spring flush. Instead, apply split rates of 25 to 50 lb/acre N after the first, second, and third grazing cycles to help drive forage growth through the summer and even out the forage supply. Applying nitrogen to pastures with more than 30% legume content (clovers, alfalfa, and birdsfoot trefoil) is often not cost effective because the legumes provide enough nitrogen for the grass.

Spring pasture turn-out is something to look forward to and does not have to be overcomplicated. The hardest part of any job is getting started. Get the fences in good repair, the watering system in tip top shape and the livestock's belly full of feed before you open the gate for the first time, and you will be off to a good start.

For more information on grazing, contact Michigan State University Extension Forage Specialist Kim Cassida at cassida@msu.edu or Beef & Grazing Educator Kable Thurlow at thurlowk@msu.edu.

Resources:

[MSUE Beef Team page](#)

[MSU Forage Connection website](#)

Teutsch, C. 2020. [Strategies for repairing pugged pastures](https://grazer.ca.uky.edu/content/strategies-repairing-pugged-pastures). University of Kentucky, <https://grazer.ca.uky.edu/content/strategies-repairing-pugged-pastures>

Controlled breeding for better beef herd management

Phil Durst

Michigan State University Extension

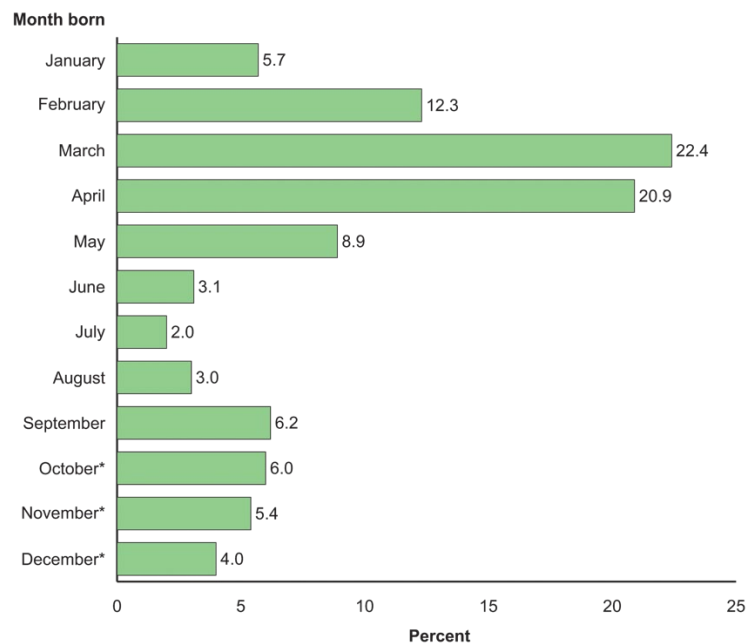
Breeding a beef cow herd and marketing calves are two sides of the same coin. When and how you manage the breeding season affects the weight and number of calves you have to sell at a given time. If your best marketing opportunity is a certain sale, such as a feeder calf sale, or at a certain time of the year, better prices will be received for having uniform groups of calves.

Groups of uniformly-sized calves are the result of a short, defined calving season because the breeding season was short and effective. A short calving season enables a producer to concentrate his or her management efforts during calving and manage brood cows as a group with similar nutrient needs.

Many cow-calf producers plan to calve in the spring, corresponding with rapid growth of pasture forages. Brood cows turn that grazed forage into milk for their calves which creates efficient calf weight gain. In fact, according to the National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) study conducted in 2017, 56% of calves were born in the months of February through April (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Monthly distribution of beef calf birth (NAHMS, 2017)

Percentage of calves born alive in 2017, by month born



*Born alive or expected to be born alive.

If it is true that a seasonal approach is the most cost-effective, then it makes sense to capitalize on it by concentrating births within the season rather than spreading them out. Yet, the NAHMS study showed that less than half (46%) of beef cow-calf farms and ranches had calvings limited to 3 or fewer months. On the other hand, almost 28% of farms had calves born in 6 or more months of the year.

The 2017 NAHMS study, published in May 2020, surveyed cow-calf producers in 24 states that represent 80% of all U.S. cow-calf businesses. Farmers and ranchers in states in the east, central and west participated, yielding data from 2013 U.S. beef cow-calf operations.

The study revealed that 77% of heifers were bred using natural service only and 15% of heifers were bred by a combination of bulls and artificial insemination (A.I.). However, cows were almost all (93%) bred by natural service only, with 5.5% bred with a combination of natural service and A.I. The small remainders in each group are the heifers (3.4%) and cows (1.0%) bred only through A.I.

A short calving season (< 120 days) is the result of a controlled breeding season. However, for the purposes of this study, a controlled breeding season was defined as removing bulls for a period of at least 30 days. Responses to the survey showed that most herds, 58% did not have a controlled breeding season and 42% of cows were in herds with no defined breeding season. It is not surprising then that calves were born in all seasons of the year on many farms.

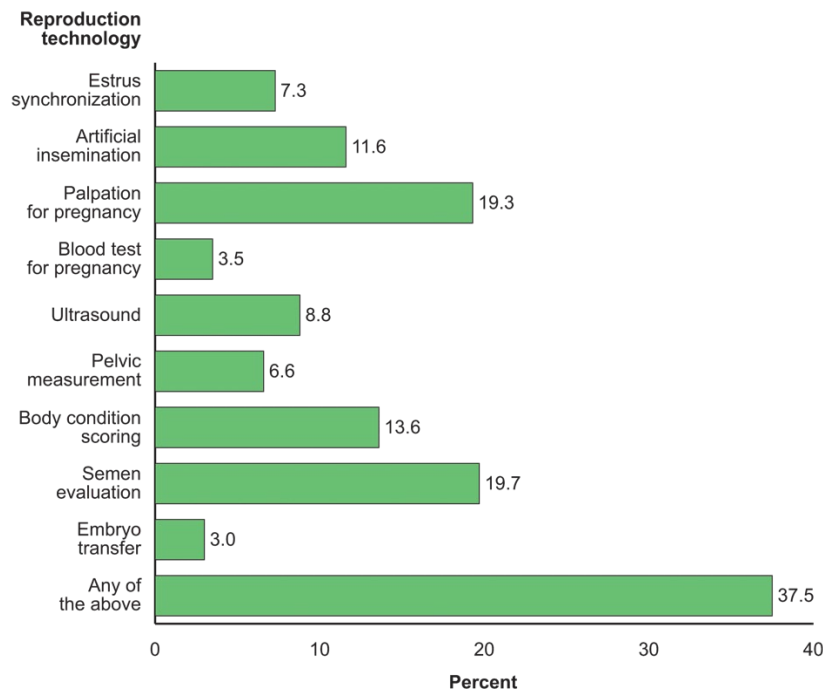
To better understand what cow-calf producers do relative to their breeding program, NAHMS investigated reproductive practices and technologies used on farms. In this, as well as in other measures, they cross referenced the size of the operation. Three sizes were defined; Small: 1-49 cows, Medium: 50-199 cows, and Large: ≥ 200 cows. The practices/technologies that were considered were estrus synchronization, A.I., pregnancy diagnosis by palpation, blood test, or ultrasound, pelvic measurement, body condition scoring (BCS), semen evaluation (part of a Breeding Soundness Exam) and embryo transfer (Figure 2).

The percentage of all producers surveyed who do any individual one of these practices is very low (< 20%). For example; 19.7% of producers did semen evaluation, 13.6% body condition scored cows, 11.6% used A.I. Some producers will have adopted more than one of these practices, but, only 38% of all producers (all regions, all sizes) did any of the listed practices. Yet, most of the practices/technologies can be done by the producer him or herself when trained. Estrus synchronization, A.I., blood draw for pregnancy diagnosis, body condition scoring, and pelvic measurement do not require a veterinarian and can be done routinely on-farm.

Large cow-calf producers (≥ 200 cows) were more likely to adopt these practices, resulting in more than half of them doing palpation and semen evaluation and 78% doing at least one of the practices.

Figure 2. Adoption rate of reproductive practices/technologies by U.S. cow-calf producers (NAHMS, 2017)

Percentage of operations by reproduction technology(ies) used



Better marketing with improved prices is dependent on increasing the management of breeding. Soon the spring calving season will be upon us. Take stock of what is going on in your herd. Use the record of calvings as your baseline to improve upon. Plan now how you can tighten the breeding season, getting as many cows and heifers bred as early in the season as possible.

A breeding soundness exam (BSE) is an important component in natural service herds. Having the bull capacity to cover the herd within a few weeks is better than having to depend on months to get some animals bred. Synchronizing cattle for estrus can be used to improve breeding season efficiency whether breeding is natural or by A.I.

When vaccinating or handling cattle in the summer, consider drawing a blood sample for pregnancy diagnosis or having a veterinarian palpate the dam. Diagnosing pregnancy early (anytime after 30 days serviced for the blood test), enables you to make better decisions about what to do with that cow or heifer.

These are starting areas for improving your breeding program; for taking control of it. When you take control of breeding, you are making a conscious effort to produce better calves and receive better prices.