

Fall Cattle Pregnancy Exams Save Money

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Fall pregnancy checks for beef cattle are an essential herd management tool. Feed costs represent 60 to 70 percent of the expense of maintaining a beef cow, but less than 20 percent of all U.S. beef producers perform a pregnancy check in their herds. Open cows can steal profits, and a good cow covers winter feed costs by producing a calf. By checking females for pregnancy, you can make sound management decisions on the pregnant animals and decide what to do with those animals that are not bred.

Identify open cows

Early fall (September) is the time to sell cows that aren't pregnant before winter feeding begins. Annual feed costs associated with maintaining a mature cow can be as high as \$500 per year, and selling cows that aren't pregnant can save as much as \$200 per head. These savings can be diverted for other uses on the farm.

Compare the cost of \$5 per head for pregnancy exams with the \$200 to \$300 cost per head of feeding the cow hay all winter. Pregnancy testing can easily pay for itself.

Keep in mind sales of cull animals, such as open heifers and cows as well as bred cows, can provide as much as 25 percent of the gross income to a cow-calf operation on an annual basis. A pregnancy diagnosis can provide an opportunity to add value to and market these cows to increase profits of the cow-calf operation. Furthermore, knowing the herd pregnancy rate can identify where problems might have occurred during the breeding season.

Additional Benefits

Knowing when cows are going to calve

Rectal palpation performed by an experienced veterinarian can predict when cows will calve based on the age of the fetus at the time of the pregnancy exam. This information can be used to better supplement cows throughout the winter. Nutrient requirements for cows are highest immediately before and after calving. Low-quality hay can be fed first. Save your best quality feed for post-calving.

Saving precious feed resources

Cows that aren't pregnant or are going to calve late can be removed from the herd as a starting point to save on forages, baled hay or pasture if dry weather occurs in the fall. Doing so may allow the remaining pregnant cows more access to stockpiled pasture or hay.

Diagnosing Pregnancy

Rectal Palpation

The most common option for pregnancy exams is rectal palpation. When this procedure is done by an experienced veterinarian it is fast, accurate and reasonably inexpensive. Prices may vary from one area to another or from one clinic to the next, but it should run about \$5 per cow. One advantage is that the diagnosis is made immediately while cows are in the chute, allowing them to be marked and sorted. Cows with reproductive tract problems can be identified and sold before they become a bigger problem. If using rectal palpation, pregnancy exams should be conducted 45 to 60 days after the cows are bred.

Ultrasound

Ultrasound technology is available for diagnosing cattle pregnancy. This option is usually more expensive, but is useful for early diagnosis and sexing the fetus. Ultrasound can be used to detect pregnancy with a high degree of accuracy as early as day 26 of gestation for heifers and day 28 for cows. Ultrasound will also allow sexing the fetus if examined between 55 and 70 days after breeding. However, these advantages will not justify this more expensive procedure in all cases. As with rectal palpation, ultrasound provides an immediate diagnosis that allows a producer to make a decision while the cow is in the chute.

Blood Sampling

Another option is a blood test. BioPRYN is a recent technology that cattle producers can use. A blood sample is taken then analyzed to test for pregnancy any time between 30 days post breeding until she calves. The sample is tested for a protein called Pregnancy Specific Protein B (PSPB) that is produced by the placenta of ruminant animals. Due to PSPB staying in the bloodstream after calving, a cow must be sampled 90 days after calving in order for the test to be accurate.

The test is about \$3 per head, which is comparable to having cows palpated. It is also a useful tool for producers with small herds. The disadvantage is having to wait on the results. Without the veterinarian using rectal palpation you cannot estimate calving dates and diagnose reproductive problems, such as uterine infections, ovarian cysts or other reasons cows are not getting bred.

Conclusion

Pregnancy diagnosis can provide an opportunity to add value to and market open cows to increase profits of the cow-calf operation. Also, feed resources will be utilized by cattle that will be productive in the year ahead. Keep in mind sales of cull animals (open heifers and cows), as well as bred cows can provide as much as 25 percent of the gross income to a cow-calf operation on an annual basis. Furthermore, knowing the herd pregnancy rate can identify where problems



might have occurred during the breeding season. Pregnancy exams are an excellent management tool to increase reproductive efficiency and profitably for beef producers. The bottom line: do a pregnancy check this fall for the herd and save money.

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