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Managing Reproduction Questions in Fall Calving Herds

I love calving out my fall cows. There is just something so peaceful about tagging new babies in tall native grass, on warm fall days. As fall calving is wrapping up, it will soon be time to start thinking about breeding cows again. Before the fall breeding season begins, a few simple management procedures in the male and female side of the cow herd will help to increase the likelihood of a high pregnancy percentage. These same principles will hold true for spring calving cow herds as well. Let's take a look at the bull side of the equation to start with.

In multi-sire breeding pastures, ensure that bulls to be pastured together have been in a common trap or pasture prior to the breeding season. Bulls WILL establish a social hierarchy. They will fight to find out who is "king of the mountain." It is better to get this done before the breeding season begins, rather than wait until they are turned out with the cows.

Put young bulls with young bulls, and mature bulls with mature bulls. Mixing the ages will result in the mature bull dominating the younger bull completely, and in some instances causing a serious injury. If the plan is to rotate bulls during the breeding season, then use the mature bulls first, and follow with the yearling bulls in the last third of the breeding season. This way, young bulls have fewer cows to breed, and will be 1-2 months older at breeding time.

Breeding soundness exams will be a cost-effective way to help weed out those bulls that may be dominant in the bull pasture, but due to poor semen quality, could cause a lowered pregnancy rate. Visit with your local veterinarian about testing the bulls soon, so that if replacements are necessary, there is enough time and opportunity to replace. Many producers offer bulls for sale at this time of year, so low or no fertility bulls can be replaced yet this fall.

So, what about the female side of reproductive success? Several factors in the cow can influence pregnancy rate. One big question producers ask is, how soon after calving can a cow become pregnant again? There are some general rules of thumb that help to answer this.

Usually the length of the post-partum interval (PPI, time from calving to the first estrous cycle) is 45-60 days in beef cows. If cows are in good body condition at calving, then the PPI would be in the 50-day range. If in poor condition, the PPI would be longer. First-calf-heifers have a longer PPI compared to mature cows.

If cows are exposed to bulls after calving, then the PPI is usually shorter. If the calf is removed at a young age, the PPI is shorter. So, a beef cow could become pregnant within 50-70 days after calving. To achieve a 365-day calving interval, a cow must become pregnant by 80-82 days post-calving (365 days - 283 days [length of gestation] = 82 days). A 365-day calving interval should be the goal for most every operation.

On the cow side, nutrition tends to be the most common reason for a less-than-desirable pregnancy percentage; the most common nutritional problem is lack of Body Condition Score (BCS) before calving. This is primarily an energy deficiency. Post-calving cows need 45% more energy and 40% more protein than a pre-partum cow. Be sure not to shortchange cows at this critical time. Mineral and vitamin deficiencies also can reduce pregnancy percentage. These can include deficiencies of selenium, vitamin E, cobalt, copper, iodine and manganese.

This is just a sampling of the big issue cow/calf producers can deal with relating to reproduction in cow herds. Many other issues including; environment, genetics, disease, and weather can also have effects on reproductive success. The major concern is to give thought to what these factors are and plan to manage them this fall.