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Why Is This Cow Open?

With fall weaning happening now or very soon pregnancy checking of the cow herd to determine how many cows are open and need to take a trip to the auction market is happening now too. Cull cow value continues to be very good and checking for an open cow may have as much value this year as any. This got me thinking about open cows and the reasons why they are open. Abortion is one cause of open cows, let's spend some time talking about that topic.

The success rate for accurate diagnosis of cattle abortion is only 25-35%. That is concerning because identifying the cause is key to preventing future problems. One problem is abortions are often the result of something that occurred weeks or months before. That makes it difficult to determine the cause at the time of the abortion. In fact, many causes of abortion are unknown. If your herd has problems with abortions, here are some key questions to ask and discuss with a veterinarian:

- What's the problem? Was it a failure to conceive or were the fetuses lost? Were the cattle preg-checked? Pregnancy failure rate should be less than 5% as a production-loss goal.
- Which animals are involved? What's the difference between the groups that conceived and calved and those that didn't? Were the affected cows home-raised or new animals brought into the herd? Which age groups are affected? What was their vaccination status? Were modified-live (ML) or killed vaccines used? ML vaccines can cause abortion if given to pregnant cows, or to calves nursing previously non-immunized cows.
- Feed type, quality and condition are all important factors to consider. Moldy feed causes 3-10% of all abortions; inhaling mold spores is just as dangerous as consuming them. A vitamin A deficiency can also cause abortions.
- Which bulls were the cows exposed to? How did those bulls perform throughout the breeding season? Consider sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially if the animals were on a community pasture. Brucellosis, listeriosis and trichomoniasis are STDs that cause abortions. Do the affected cows have a common sire or dam?
- When did the problem occur? Were the fetuses lost at a certain stage of gestation? Abortion in the 9th month could be due to nitrates in the feed. Handling, or any kind of stress, can also trigger abortions. Did it occur on pastures or when feed was changed? Was the feed tested? Was it free of nitrates? Were cows affected suddenly, or did the problem pass through the herd slowly? Typical abortions occur at low levels of about 2% and are usually seen at the beginning of calving.
- Where did the problem occur? Did affected and unaffected animals reside in different pastures or ranges? What were the field conditions and stocking densities? Was feed and water plentiful?
- Why did it occur? Identify the cow that aborted and isolate it. Recover the aborted fetus and membranes. The stage gestation can be determined by fetus size and other characteristics: Submit as many fetus samples as possible to a diagnostic lab. The first calf to die is the most important, as a diagnosis may help avoid future abortions.