

Beef Newsletter

Spring Herd Health Management during a human health pandemic



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Farming is a business for the long term, and decisions made today can affect the operation for many years. Genetic progress is slow, and the consequences of poor fertility in one breeding season can last for generations in a herd. Producers face the need to make decisions today that will determine how many calves will be weaned in the fall of 2021, how many fat cattle will be marketed in 2022, how many acres of forage will be available in 2023, and how the farm will be passed on to the next generation in years to come. Producers are all too familiar with planning how they will weather unexpected down-turns in the market, and are using these skills as we face the global COVID-19 pandemic. Planning for recovery when times are better is essential for survival of the farm operation, and so is maintaining the health and productivity of the herd until then.

Bull Fertility

One sub-fertile bull has a much greater impact on the bottom line than does one sub-fertile cow. Even when multiple bulls are used in a group, calving rates next year can be drastically reduced if the dominant bull who does most of the breeding is sub-fertile; not only does he sire fewer calves himself, he also prevents other more fertile bulls from breeding cows. Studies have shown that the scrotal circumference of a bull is correlated to the age at puberty of his daughters and their fertility at breeding, so a sub-fertile bull can affect the

calving success of heifers in two years' time. Our veterinarians perform breeding soundness examinations on bulls that include semen collection and evaluation, as well as a physical assessment of the bull including examination of the penis and testicles, and measurement of the scrotal circumference. Breeding soundness examinations can detect infertile and sub-fertile bulls now, which is more profitable than finding out in the fall that a number of cows will not calve next year.

Cow Fertility

The single most important factor affecting the weaning weight of a calf is its birth date. Despite differences in milk production of the cows and genetic ability of the calves to gain, a calf born at the beginning of the calving season will weigh more in the fall than a calf born at the end of the calving season. A calf born on March 1 could easily weigh 120 lbs more than one born on May 1, a difference in value at weaning of between \$100 and \$300, depending on market price. When culling decisions are to be made, look at those cows that have not calved by 45 days after the start of the calving season. Perhaps they should be sold in-calf; perhaps they should be calved and sold as cow-calf pairs, or perhaps they should be earmarked for sale in the fall. The decision will be influenced by how much pasture is available, how much hay is available for next winter, and when slaughter capacity is expected to return as the pandemic wears on.

Nutrition and body condition are of vital importance to successful, timely breeding. Cows should be in body condition score of at least 3.5 out of 5 at the time of breeding. Spring pasture is rich in nutrients, but cows need to be in good body condition at turn-out if breeding is not to be delayed.



Adequate intake of properly balanced mineral is important for conception and pregnancy, so a source of mineral and cobalt iodized salt must be provided on pasture.

Cow fertility can be improved by having our veterinarians examine those cows that are at risk of delayed rebreeding: the heifer that had a difficult calving, the cow that prolapsed her uterus, and the one that retained her placenta. Pregnancy diagnosis on those at the tail end of group and have not yet calved can prevent an open cow from going to grass for “another chance” – and another year of free room and board.

Synchronisation of breeding can help to shift the calving season forward. We can evaluate cows and heifers for breeding, show you how to place CIDR devices, and will set up a treatment and breeding schedule that will help you to get the most out of controlled breeding systems.

Vaccination

Immunity plays an important role in ensuring that cows that become pregnant stay pregnant. Early embryonic death owing to BVD infection and abortion caused by IBR virus or one of several strains of *Leptospira* can be controlled by vaccination. Vaccination prior to turn-out and breeding can be done with either modified live vaccines such as Express 10, or with killed vaccines such as Triangle 10. Remember that a cow that loses her pregnancy in 2020 will not wean a calf in 2021, and will not have a calf finished in 2022. Blackleg is an easily preventable cause of sudden death on pasture, and every year we see good calves found dead without any opportunity for treatment. Vaccination with Tasvax or Covexin reliably prevents Blackleg and several related diseases.



Spring Processing

Dehorning and castration of calves before they go to pasture saves time and trouble next fall, and reduces stress and disease around the time of weaning. Treating calves with a second dose of vitamin E and Selenium (Dystosel) helps to prevent White Muscle Disease from occurring on pasture. Ontario soils are deficient in Selenium, a mineral that is necessary to protect muscle fibre membranes.

Increased exercise when calves are turned out to pasture increases the oxidative stress on muscles, increasing the risk of White Muscle Disease. Calves may be found down, weak, or simply dead when the muscle of the heart is affected.

Our veterinarians and technicians can help you with your spring processing requirements. We will be maintaining biosecurity and social distancing around the chute while performing procedures that support the agricultural supply chain, in accordance with Ontario's COVID-19 Emergency Order.



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