

Focus on Fertility: The role of your veterinarian

Richard Hopper, DVM

There is no area of your cattle operation in which your veterinarian can be more useful than in the area of your cowherd's reproductive performance. The first step is to identify a veterinarian that you like and are comfortable working with. Arrange a time to visit with them so that you can convey the fact that you are interested in increasing the efficiency of your cowherd and need their help. Gauge their interest and decide if you want to continue or seek out someone else. Then discuss which of the following procedures or management tools are most important and which would be best to utilize first. The following are services your veterinarian can provide that can either directly improve the productivity of your herd or provide you with information that allows you to make management decisions that will help. I understand that most readers have already incorporated some of these procedures into their management, but for the purpose of completeness I will cover all.

Health management with an emphasis on diseases that decrease reproductive efficiency is a good place to start. Talk with your veterinarian about first a testing program to reveal the current health status of your herd and then a vaccination program. Finding and eliminating just one persistently infected BVD animal or preventing one abortion justifies this effort. The vaccination program should cover the economically important reproductive diseases (infertility and abortion). Also utilize vaccination and other management tools aimed at the survivability and health of your calves.

The bull side of the fertility equation can be covered with timely breeding soundness exams (often termed a BSE or BBSE-Bull Breeding Soundness Evaluation) and/or through an evaluation of your AI program. With respect to the BSE, check bulls annually and most veterinarians recommend that this is done 2-4 weeks before turnout. Specific management of breeding bulls will be covered in a subsequent article, as will the implementation of an AI program.

With respect to the cows, the aforementioned vaccination program followed by pregnancy palpation and body condition scoring (BCS) are important. Remember with respect to the results of the pregnancy and BCS it is not the procedures, but rather how you use the results that provides value. Both allow opportunities to make cost saving decisions; culling, segregation or re-grouping for optimal nutritional management, or early weaning. Heifer development and management of young cows through the 2nd calf is an important aspect of the female side of the fertility equation and will be covered specifically in a later article, as will the topic of calving problems (dystocia). For now though and for the purpose of this article, consider and discuss with your veterinarian the implementation of a pre-breeding exam for heifers. This generally occurs at a time when a vaccination booster is given and your veterinarian can palpate the heifer for the purpose of evaluating their reproductive tract (Reproductive tract scoring-RTS). It is also useful to BCS the heifers at this time and you may want to have your veterinarian perform pelvic measurements. At some point you may decide to initiate an estrus synchronization and AI

program for your heifers. This provides many benefits in addition to the likely genetic improvement to your herd that AI generally provides, but demands good management.

As a final note, remember all of these procedures can increase the productivity of your herd, but how much they help sometimes depends on how well you use the information that they provide. It is much like the activity of reading this or other articles. You can carefully read and digest all the information and you can be in total agreement. However, if you don't take action, nothing changes. Also, don't let what is sometimes a tendency to focus on the veterinarian's fees, be a reason to not implement some or all of these management tools.