Which Comes First, Calving or Rebreeding?

Regardless of which takes priority in your mind, calving and rebreeding success is always in season.

You've heard the dilemma, "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" A similar dilemma plays out in the cattle industry each year as we start preparing for calving season.

Which comes first, calving or rebreeding? You might put all of your eggs in the calving "basket," since a live, healthy calf is often first priority. But a calf is ultimately the result of a successful cattle breeding cycle, and preparation for calving and rebreeding should occur simultaneously.

Calving and rebreeding ideally occur within a relatively short, but very critical, 85-day window. How a heifer or cow calves out at the beginning of the window will impact her ability to get bred at the end of the window, and how quickly rebreeding occurs will impact a cow's ability to stay on a 365-day calving cycle.

Tips to prepare for spring cattle calving and rebreeding:

1 Monitor cattle body condition score

Cow body condition score (BCS) at calving not only affects colostrum quality, cow stamina (to get through birthing) and calf vigor, it also impacts the time until that cow starts cycling again.

You want cows cycling prior to the breeding season so when they come into heat during breeding season, you have a better chance of getting them bred in the first 21 days. Cows bred early in the breeding season will result in calves born early in calving season.

Calf age has the biggest impact on weaning weight. Therefore, calves born in the first 21 days of the season are likely heavier at weaning. If you estimate that a calf gains between 2.25 to 2.5 lb. per day, every heat cycle is worth roughly 50 pounds. That's why it's so critical to get cows rebred on the first cycle.

Mature cows should calve at a minimum body condition score of 5.5, but preferably at a score of 6. Heifers should calve at a minimum score of 6. Cattle supplementation can help maintain a consistent body condition score, which can lead to cows breeding back quickly, optimize conception rates and produce heavier calf weaning weights.

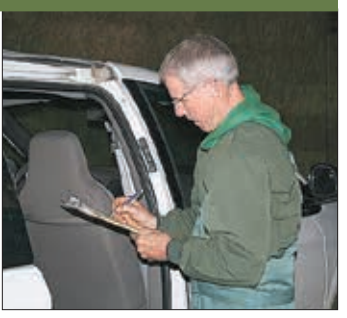
2 Evaluate your mineral program

Mineral nutrition is one of the most commonly overlooked items on the calving and rebreeding preparation list. Make sure you're providing an adequate mineral program year-round versus right at calving or before breeding. Minerals are especially important 60 to 90 days before calving, since they impact colostrum quality, calf trace mineral status and calf health.

Minerals also play a role in tissue repair, helping the cow's reproductive tract repair from calving and prepare for breeding. If the tract is not fully repaired, a cow may have challenges being rebred, or she may not breed back at all.

A program with highly bioavailable trace mineral sources can be of benefit, especially leading up to calving season and through breeding. The bioavailability of a mineral source alters the absorptive ability of the trace minerals eliciting their full benefit.

3 Discuss cattle health with your veterinarian



If you don't have a comprehensive herd health program, now is the time to talk with your veterinarian or animal health supplier to develop one. If you have a program, it can be beneficial to reevaluate and ensure the protocols still make sense.

Make sure you have a vaccination program in place for both cows and calves. Since every operation has a different risk level in how and when it calves, the program should be specific to the operation and region.

For operations with multiple employees, make sure everyone is familiar and comfortable with the cattle vaccination program ahead of time. Getting everyone on the same page before calving begins can help ensure protocols are followed correctly and consistently.

4 Take time to troubleshoot

Calving and rebreeding are two of the most important events for an operation's bottom line, which make it stressful when things don't go as planned. However, an overreaction may make things even worse.

It's important to take an objective approach when a challenge arises. Troubleshoot and try to figure out what the true cause is versus making a knee-jerk decision. Involve your nutritionist, veterinarian, suppliers, employees and other key personnel to help work through a cause and solution. A team discussion can help identify the diagnostic work needed to find a solution. **HW**

— Chad Zehnder, *Purina Animal Nutrition LLC cattle nutritionist*