



PHOTO BY JAMI GILLIG

Get Your Veterinarian on Board

by Kim Kanzler Holt

“In the cattle production system, your cattle are only as good as your weakest link — genetics, health, management, feedstuffs — all those things. We do everything we can with preventative medicine so that we don’t have to treat calves,” says Jim Lerwick of

Lerwick Brothers LCC. “Health management may not be quite as important as genetic management, but it’s really, really close.”

Lerwick Brothers is a third- and fourth-generation father-and-sons diversified farming and ranching operation that harvests heterosis in a terminal cow-calf crossbreeding program in southeastern Wyoming.

This family’s cattle operation, overseen by Lerwick and his daughter-in-law, Diane Lerwick, strives to do a lot of things right in order to enhance the value of its calf products, of which they’ve retained ownership on a portion for more than 20 years.

“We keep complete individual history, use a veterinary supervised herd-health program and precondition prior to weaning,” Lerwick says. He shares that past experiences and relationships with the market indicate their health program, over time, has been worth somewhere between \$2.50 and \$6 per hundredweight (cwt.).

During calving season, this operation implements the Sandhills Calving System, managing pairs and newborns to minimize transmission of scours-causing pathogens.

The Lerwicks’ investment in herd health also includes an established relationship with their veterinarian, Dr. Bill Shain, whom Lerwick describes as being “terribly important” to their operation.

In fact, he likens this relationship to the one their farming enterprise has with its crop consultant who checks Lerwick-tilled crops each week during the growing season, sharing with them “challenges and opportunities for enhanced profitability.”

Lerwick states, “My veterinarian fits in that same category. He sees my cattle at preconditioning, pregnancy checking, and a few during calving season. He keeps a mental catalog of my herd’s health so, based on his training, he can help me avoid something that might be very expensive if not corrected.”

“He’s considered part of our team and receives professional fees for the services he renders. But he also brings forward management thought processes for our operation.” Lerwick adds, “He’s

well aware of our herd and what our objectives are,” which include the maximization of profitability via appropriate marketing and husbandry practices.

Lerwick says husbandry is a pretty broad term, “but is an important part of our business.” One way they’ll measure it this year is by moving their quality, later-calving cows to a May-June calving interval specifically for three reasons, one of which is health. He says, “March and April are our wettest, toughest months that create health challenges for our cattle and we want to avoid that.”

Shain, the owner of Bluffs Veterinary Clinic in Pine Bluffs, Wyo., has shared a working relationship with Lerwick Brothers since his start there in 1984. A graduate of the Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Shain is also a Beef Quality Assurance-certified instructor in Wyoming and Nebraska. Like the Lerwicks, his goal is to prevent rather than treat disease.

In doing so, his clinic has established complete health programs for feedlot cattle and cow-calf herds, among other livestock. These programs are tailored to the needs of individual operations and include vaccinations, parasite control and related procedures. Shain also offers consulting options for production records and financial analysis.

“All management is interrelated,” he remarks. “You can’t concentrate just on genetics or nutrition or financial aspects, while ignoring the health side of it. They all play into each other. There are probably some that are more important to the bottom line, but they’re all interrelated.”

He says he believes that for a cow-calf producer — or any food-animal producer — veterinary services should always be looked at as an investment, not as “just a cost.” He says that thought process needs to be shared by both producers and veterinarians.

When veterinarians ask questions and possess knowledge of an operation and its goals, Shain says they’re better able to assist producers with herd-health programs that prevent disease and to tailor vaccination programs, for example, to a producer’s marketing situation.

Beef production is a business, he says, “so veterinarians themselves need to understand that and make sure their services are actually adding to the value of the operation.” **HW**

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