



Bred or Open?

Confirming pregnancy earlier offers management and economic benefits.

by *Lowell T. Midla, DVM*

Most progressive producers diagnose their cows for pregnancy status — pregnant versus not pregnant (open) — prior to calving, most commonly around the time of weaning. However, there are potential advantages to performing this examination earlier — approximately 90 to 100 days following the start of the breeding season.

Gathering cows for pregnancy diagnosis prior to weaning time might be difficult in your management system, but please keep an open mind as you explore the potential advantages described below. Also keep in mind there might be some years when environmental conditions make early pregnancy diagnosis more advantageous than others, such as times of drought and limited forage.

Reasons to check earlier

Potential advantages of earlier pregnancy diagnosis are multifaceted.

1. Marketing open cows earlier in the season, when cull cow prices

are higher, may yield increased economic return. A significant portion of the gross profit of a cow-calf operation comes from the sale of cull cows. Ask yourself, “What fraction of my cows have covered their costs for heifer-raising, feed and ranch overhead?” It is likely some cows only return you a net profit on the day you cull them. Maximizing, or better yet, optimizing the return on culling day can contribute significantly to your bottom line.

2. Depending on the body condition score (BCS) of individual cows, placing an open cow on feed for a short period of time prior to marketing may also yield a greater return. Of course, the cost-benefit of doing so varies year to year based on feed price, your ability to correctly predict the future sale price, etc.

3. Removing open cows from the pasture leaves more forage for the remaining cows.

4. Following pregnancy diagnosis, bred cows can be

segregated into a herd with bull calves and a separate herd with heifer calves to avoid unintended pregnancies in the heifer calves.

5. If cows are scored for body condition at the time of pregnancy diagnosis, thin cows can be segregated and managed in a different pasture with better forage or supplemental feed, giving them more time to catch up.

6. If using artificial insemination (AI) with cleanup bulls, you can more accurately determine whether the cow was bred AI or via natural service. It is much easier for your veterinarian to accurately assess the age of the fetus if pregnancy diagnosis is performed when all pregnancies are less than or equal to approximately 100 to 120 days of gestation. The earlier pregnancy checks are done, the more accurate they can be. Determining whether a cow is bred to an AI sire or natural-service sire also can be a potential factor in culling decisions if a specific cow is, “on the bubble.”

7. As previously alluded to, earlier pregnancy diagnosis helps veterinarians predict calving dates with more accuracy. Thus, you can be reasonably confident which cows will calve early in the calving season versus those that will calve later. This allows you to minimize the population density in the calving area and reduce the risk of disease incidence that comes with moving later-calving cows into the calving area at the start of the season. Knowing when calves will be born also provides the opportunity to cull a late-calving cow that is already on your list of possible culls. Remember, a calf’s weaning weight declines approximately 50 pounds for each 21 days later it is born in the calving season. Furthermore, a late-calving cow this year will likely be a late calver next year.

8. Earlier pregnancy diagnosis, along with disciplined culling of open cows, enables you to improve herd fertility faster by

allowing cows to cull themselves if they are unable to conceive promptly under your management and in your environment.

9. If you bypass the opportunity to diagnose cow pregnancy earlier, consider it for your heifers. Open heifers can be sold at a younger, more appropriate age to enter the feedlot, and they may bring a higher price. Remember, there is no excuse for a heifer to be open.

10. Notwithstanding vaccine labels, there is evidence that traditional weaning time may still be too early in the cow's gestation to get the most benefit from neonatal diarrhea/scours vaccines. Earlier pregnancy diagnosis provides opportunity to wait and match vaccine administration to a more appropriate time, although it also means you will need to work the cows another time.

Other considerations

There is a largely mistaken belief that rectal palpation for pregnancy diagnosis — particularly when performed early in gestation — causes pregnancy loss and other potential problems. Several studies indicate rectal palpation poses little to no risk to the pregnancy.

If open cows are sold prior to your typical weaning time, then you'll need to wean calves nursing those cows early. This will require some facilities, feed and management. However, these calves will be old enough to wean and will likely gain more weight on feed than out with their dams,

even factoring in weaning shrink. This is especially likely if you are doing it in a drought year.

Timing is everything. It is

important to delay pregnancy diagnosis until you can diagnose pregnancies in the cows that you want to keep. You need to decide whether you truly want to keep those late-calving cows. **HW**

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— Lowell T. Midla, DVM

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