



### Biography:

Dr. Colin Palmer is an Associate Professor of Theriogenology (Animal Reproduction) at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine. Originally from Nova Scotia, Dr. Palmer worked in mixed practices in Ontario and British Columbia and has owned/operated a practice in Saskatchewan. Dr. Palmer along with his wife Kim and children Lauren, Emily and Carter run a herd of purebred Red Angus cattle under the KC Cattle Co. name.

## Maximizing Opportunities in Today's Economy with Sound Herd Management

For the beef cow-calf producer the revenue side of the profitability equation has two major components: pounds of calf weaned and cull cows sold. Both income streams are seeing prices that few of us thought were possible 5 years ago so why not take the best possible advantage of these good times? Weaning a high percentage of calves from cows exposed to bulls and at optimum weaning weights are the two most important things you can do maximize profitability!

Calf health and breeding related issues usually top my list of common questions I am asked this time of year. Poor quality, late born and certainly dead calves can have a significant effect on the revenue side; especially this year. Many producers report having a few to several sick calves over the late summer/ fall and are concerned that they be about to experience a wreck at weaning, or have had had wrecks in the past and want to know what to do to prevent it happening again. On the breeding front it seems that more and more producers are noticing a few cows cycling very late in the season causing them to worry that a bull wasn't doing his job or that they have a sexually transmitted disease in the herd.

Vaccinating young calves (2 to 4 months old) against respiratory diseases at spring processing is becoming commonplace. If you are not vaccinating calves and are treating depressed calves, coughing and/ or nasal discharge during the summer grazing period then you should definitely consider doing so. If your calf health problems occur at weaning then consider vaccinating calves 3 to 6 weeks prior to weaning to allow their immune systems to respond adequately so as to prevent, or at least lessen, the impact of a disease agent. Your vaccine program should provide protection against *Mannheimia* (formerly *Pasteurella*) *haemolytica* the bacteria responsible for the so-called shipping fever pneumonia. Other agents that you should strongly consider vaccinating against in your pre-weaning program include Bovine Virus Diarrhea Virus (BVDV), Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR), Bovine Respiratory Syncytial Virus (BRSV), *Histophilus somni* and, of course, the *Clostridia* (Blackleg) bacteria. There are many good products available on the market; some are just what you need all in a single shot. Certainly other things to keep in mind are low stress weaning techniques including nose tags (i.e. Quietwean®) and fence line weaning. The value of cattle has increased many fold in comparison to the cost of our inputs this year so I see no reason why a producer could not see a healthy return from a sound vaccination and weaning program. Calves that have been stricken with disease and recovered seldom perform as well their healthy counterparts and represent a huge loss of revenue.

Other considerations for your calves include growth implants, deworming and creep feeding. There are many oral and topical anti-parasitics available. Most of us have fallen into the habit

of only using broad spectrum anti-parasitics in the late fall to kill lice, but research has shown that use of these products on pastured cattle can pay big dividends in improved performance. Probably even better returns than controlling lice. Again, factor in the relatively low cost of these products in comparison with the value of your product – the calves. Growth implants for calves not intended as replacements have always made sense, but these products have suffered unfairly due to negative publicity, and in my opinion, producer apathy. You can bet pretty much bet that those calves you sell will be implanted in the feedlot so why not use this technology and reap some reward yourself. If you can expect 20 to 25 pounds of extra gain in that calf isn't an extra 40 to 50 dollars, or more, in your pocket worth the effort?

The low cost of feed grains combined with the high price of cattle has been dubbed the "perfect storm" for our industry. Calves easily outstrip what their mothers can supply within a few months and need outside sources of energy and protein to continue to grow. By late summer pasture quality has declined and in many cases gain dwindles to less than 1.5 lbs per day as we move into the fall when the potential to gain at least 2.5 pounds per day is there. Cow body condition also suffers; especially, in heavy milkers jeopardizing future calf performance and her breed back potential next year. At 6 cents per pound and a feed conversion of 10:1 (feed to gain) it is easy to see that 60 cents worth of feed can return \$2.25 per pound in calf gain. Take out costs of the creep feeder etc. and you will see that it is still easy to make a profit. Furthermore, calves started on feed will have an easier time at weaning and should be healthier yielding more potential profit.

Although bull power is usually the first consideration there are many other reasons that cows may be seen in heat weeks or months after the beginning of the breeding season. I usually like to define the problem and that starts with pregnancy checking. Guessing, fretting and checking bulls seldom provide the answer. A bull that passes his breeding soundness check today may not have passed 2 months ago. What about his ability to breed? Did you actually see him serve cows? In many cases, a few cows are late and were late calvers last year, or represent a single management group e.g. newly purchased animals, 1st calvers, old cows, and so on. Now once they have been identified further investigation is possible. On the vast majority of operations, nutrition - energy, protein, minerals and vitamins, is likely responsible for more production loss than any infectious disease. Recent evidence shows that many feeding programs fail to supply adequate levels of trace minerals to support reproduction. Feed testing and mineral supplementation definitely makes sense when you think about it in terms of pounds of weaned calf. On the flip side, if you sell off those open and late calvers you will be well paid for them.