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.

A Breeder's ... Veterinary Perspective

Revisiting Cow Herd Performance

One of the joys of summer is checking the cattle herd at pasture; especially, looking at how the calves are growing. Thoughts wander to quality of the pasture; cow performance and health; the bulls you have purchased and how well their progeny are doing; mineral supplementation; fly control and so on. With any luck, your cattle checks are mostly easy not requiring a treatment or a search for missing cattle. Most of us can't help but wonder what those calves will be worth when it comes time to market them? What will our marketing plan be? Will we hold some or all of the calves back? Will we keep more replacement heifers and expand the herd, or is this a good time to sell off some bred cows to lighten the workload? The pasture season is also a great time to evaluate how your herd is measuring up. Are you satisfied with your herd's performance or are you looking for change? Maybe you are just a bit curious about what others in the industry are doing?

There are a few different ways to see how your herd measures up. Probably the simplest and without a doubt the most common technique is looking over the neighbor's fence to eyeball his or her calves. It helps if you know roughly how many cows she has, and maybe when he calves and any other genetic or management tools the Jones' may have at their disposal. This information can help make keeping up a whole lot easier. Getting off the ranch on guided tours, visiting other commercial or purebred operations and attending livestock shows are definitely worthwhile; however, topping my list would be trips to the auction market to assess calf weights; breeding/ feeding programs and of course market price.

Next on the list is making use of cow-calf production survey data - a definite step forward for the manager that is not easily wowed by the sale-topping pen of calves that on the surface look superior to anything he has ever marketed. The survey data is used to produce benchmarks for production indicators, management factors and economic numbers that you can use for comparison with your herd's numbers. Sets of benchmarks may be found in industry magazines or online through the interweb. The ever popular economist, Harlan Hughes, recently utilized data from North Dakota's Farm Business Management Benchmarks in the July 2016 issue of Beef Magazine, pages 6-8, which is part of the Finpack (farm financial planning and analysis software) set of benchmarks produced by the University of Minnesota. For Western Canadians, an excellent resource is the 2014 Western Canadian Cow-Calf Survey (2014 WCCCS) published in June 2015 by the Western Canadian Beef Development Centre (WCBDC). This survey is easily found on the WCBDC website, provincial ministries of agriculture and on the Beef Cattle Research Council (BCRC) website. The data was gathered from producer surveys submitted from all four western provinces. The authors of this report have a done a good job of reporting the percentage response to each question and have presented the data in both tables and figures.

Weaned calf sales are the bread and butter of the cow-calf industry so it stands to reason that calculations like weaning percentage (live calves born per females exposed during the previous breeding season) and the more telling pounds of weaned calf per female exposed are very useful herd performance indicators. The latter addresses not only pregnancy rate, abortions, and calf loss but also time of calving, calving distribution, cow productivity (milking ability) and overall herd nutrition. In the 2014 WCCCS the weaning percentage was 85% and the average pounds of weaned calf per cow exposed was 534 pounds. Seventy two percent of respondents sold on average almost half of their calves at weaning. Just 9% preconditioned their calves for 30 to 60 days before marketing. Now most of us agree, no single cow-type or breed makeup is going to fit every operation, but regardless of the type of cattle we all get paid based on pounds of calf sold. I recently read an article where it was shown that the most profitable producers fed their calves for a period following weaning to increase the value of those calves.

One of the problems with benchmarks are that they are typically reported as averages. If your own herd's performance exceeds the benchmark in all categories that just means you are better than average of the producers completing the survey. Researchers also use benchmarks to look at industry trends, to see where more research is needed and to see how well producers are utilizing knowledge that has already been produced. You can access that information too. Using the examples above, the weaning percentage should be at least 90% which will definitely help pull the pounds of weaned calf up.

Another interesting finding in the 2014 WCCCS was that only 42% of respondents reported having 60% or more of their calves born in the first 3 weeks of the calving. Given that typical natural service conception rates are 60 to 70% per cycle achieving the goal of 60% of the calf crop in the first 3 weeks requires that all of the cows are cycling at the beginning of the breeding season. Clearly that is not happening in the majority of herds which will, in turn, have a substantial negative affect on weaned calf weights. If this decribes your herd then things like better pre-calving and post-calving nutrition; selecting replacements from early-calving cows and managing heifers so that they have more time to recover after their first calf before rebreeding should definitely be addressed. Blind faith just simply leaves too much money on the table instead of your back pocket.

Future articles will cover tools to improve reproductive performance.