



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

Pregnancy Checking: Sooner is Better than Later!

In my last article, Revisiting Cow Herd Performance, I discussed a recommended production goal of 60% of the cow herd calving in the first 3 weeks of the calving season; however, less than half of the herds participating in the 2014 Western Canadian Cow-Calf Survey reported achieving this goal. The most common explanation for falling short of this goal is that there are too many cows not cycling at the beginning of the breeding season. Inadequate pre- and post-calving nutrition, insufficient mineral supplementation, genetics etc. may be blamed, but it is rarely a single breeding season phenomenon. I will step out on a flimsy limb and say that every reason for late calving cows can be lumped into the herd management basket. Why? Cows that calved late last season will undoubtedly calve late next season. Bull power; nutrition, including minerals and vitamins; abortion, sexually transmitted disease; twins; illness; cow age; genetics, and stress comprise a strong list of possible reasons why there may be late calving cows in a herd, but management is the reason they will remain in the herd. In the best case scenario late calving cows, if otherwise reproductively sound, can usually only be caught up by 4 to 5 weeks per season because their reproductive system needs at least 40 to 50 days to become functional again after calving. So for managers there are really only 3 choices when dealing with an open or late calving cow: 1) keep her; 2) cull her; and 3) move her to another calving season i.e. fall or next year. Any one of these choices might be plausible in certain circumstances, but generally speaking the most economically sound decision is to cull her.

Prices will continue downward for the next few years with the bottom predicted to occur in 2019. Cull cow prices have been hovering around \$100 cwt for some time now while the price of replacement

females has softened considerably. The costs of maintaining an open, late calving or early calving cow are same whether she produces a calf or not, but there is big difference in the profit per cow. Regardless of when you wean or when you ship your calves the early calving cows will have bigger calves. Even when the price slide is factored in heavier calves bring more money which translates to more profit per cow.

Pregnancy checking makes good economic sense for all operations. Based on personal experience, watching for potential open cows to display heat will probably only expose half of them at most with many of these not showing up until they have consumed several months of good winter feed. Late calvers will not be identified until well ... it is too late! Early pregnancy checking say at, or even before, weaning is more effective as it is easier to stage the pregnancy. After 5 or 6 months of gestation it is easy to be off by at least a month or even worse. Ultrasound does not offer any advantage at this point. The most ideal scenario is to palpate cows that are 3 to 4 months pregnant with producers wanting those less than 2 months or less and obviously open specifically identified. Open cows can be culled immediately or fed to improve condition – you decide. The late calvers can be sold as opens or even sold as bred cows to operations looking for cows to calve in this window. Excess feed can be fed to more productive animals or sold. I won't tell you what to do with extra money.