



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

The Value Of A Herd Health Program

Often the most significant changes that occur during the span of one's career in an industry often go largely unnoticed. It is as if we forget what it used to be like, or we simply accept the new normal as the way it has always been. The number of beef cow-calf herds, both commercial and purebred, that can boast that they have a herd health program has been steadily increasing. Because of this, many disease outbreaks that used to be common seem like they are rarely heard of compared to forty and fifty years ago. Still, not all herds have a program leaving us all at risk of purchasing a problem, or particularly for seedstock producers, selling animals that will move into at-risk herds where your animals may not realize their full potential.

A blog posted in March 2020 on the Beef Cattle Research Council (BCRC) website entitled: The Cost Benefit of Using Vaccines in Beef Cattle reports on survey research which showed that in Western Canada 10 percent of producers do not vaccinate for infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) and bovine viral diarrhea virus (BVDV) both of which can result in respiratory disease and devastating losses due to abortion. Worse still is that BVDV may result in the birth of generally poor performing persistently BVDV-infected (PI) calves that continue to shed the virus within the herd. The proportion of beef producers with an appropriate vaccination program decreases in Eastern Canada with a third of Ontario

producers not vaccinating against BVDV and over one quarter of Atlantic Canadian producers not utilizing vaccines at all.

Bovine respiratory disease which includes everything from coughing calves, to shipping fever, and pneumonia has been and still is the costliest disease affecting the cattle industry. If they survive, affected cattle are never quite right. Those that experience severe, longstanding illness are prone to other conditions affecting the rumen because of damage to the vagus nerve as it passes through the chest. The BCRC blog provides data from a study which showed that calves that experienced respiratory disease could weigh up to 36 pounds less than their healthy herd mates. Most of these losses will go unnoticed since only the poor performers are recognized while others appear normal or develop seemingly unrelated conditions later in life. For example, most poor doing calves that are mild to moderate, repeat bloaters likely had a bout of calfhood pneumonia. There is no way to cure those calves or to regain the performance lost due to respiratory disease. Prevention in the form of an effective vaccination program is the best way to go yet herd vaccination programs have tended to be undervalued in the cattle industry. Supported by difficulties in verifying that purchased calves have been properly vaccinated and an almost steady stream of evermore effective

antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory products the significance of major improvements in vaccines and vaccine strategies has largely been overshadowed. The BCRC has provided a useful tool designed to help producers calculate the financial premium that could be assigned to a vaccinated calf: Cost-Benefit of Feeding BRD (Bovine Respiratory Disease) Vaccinated Calves tool. Check it out! Assigning dollar values to the benefit of management inputs is significant for any industry.

What is the difference between a herd health program and a vaccination program? Although, answers may vary, I will define a vaccination program as simply administering a standard set of vaccines to part, or all the herd at specific times. The vaccine program may provide suitable protection against major diseases, but the key is that the producer generally has limited communication with a veterinarian regarding what is best for the herd. For many, this may be all that they want; it works for them! A herd health program is developed in consultation with your veterinarian and includes more than just a vaccine program. A solid vaccination program will be the core of any beef herd health program, but a proper herd health program should never be a no questions asked, drug dispensing relationship with a vet. Although convenient pickup is handy, there should be communication with your veterinarian about what you should be vaccinating against, when you should be vaccinating, and which products/product combinations are best for your operation. Modified live vaccines, containing attenuated live virus are generally recommended over killed virus vaccines because of better, longer lasting immune protection. Often modified live vaccines can not be used in pregnant animals apart from a limited group of products that require initial vaccination to have occurred when the animal was not pregnant. Vaccine programs to prevent calf scours, foot rot,

clostridial diseases (e.g., blackleg), Leptospira infections, pinkeye, respiratory diseases in calves, and venereal disease are available. For most herds, vaccinating against every infectious agent possible will be overkill unless the bottom line is of little concern. Other components of herd health programs involve development of biosecurity plans for your herd, antiparasitic use, necropsies of deadstock, nutrition consultation, pregnancy checking, record keeping and assessment of herd performance. New products and services are being developed all the time. Because we operate in an industry with tight margins it is important to be able to realize a tangible return on investment. The most important component of an effective herd health program is good communication. You and your vet need to have regular, scheduled meetings to review the program. Once a year is likely suitable in most situations and is appropriate to maintaining a valid vet client patient relationship (VCPR). Specifically discuss disease risks, vaccines, goals, and cost to benefit. The names of products and protocols should be provided in writing. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are very useful even for owner/managers because we can all be forgetful.

Many seedstock producers have sound herd health programs established and can play a role in promoting the benefits of these programs to others. The commercial cattle industry often views seedstock producers as industry leaders so it should not be surprising that one of the most common reasons a commercial buyer will give for purchasing at your sale is because of your reputation as a producer. If you have a herd health program be proud of it and describe it in your sale catalogue or at your sale. Don't be afraid to ask your vet for input ... they might even right up a camera-ready letter that can be included in your catalogue. Herd health programs bring tremendous value to operation and to your reputation.