

Benefits of Pregnancy Testing your Cow Herd

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Pregnancy checking season is amongst us with November typically being our businest month of preg checking at the clinic. Cows are home from summer pasture and calves are weaned or in the process of being weaned as we speak. Which leads to the question is it worth preg checking your cow herd?

Before we decide if it's worth it or not there are 3 options to choose from:

1. Preg-checking and culling the open cows in the fall.
2. Preg-checking and feed open cows separately.
3. Not preg-checking and feed cows over winter.

Each year presents its own challenges and one of the simple factors when deciding to preg check is how much feed you have or how much feeding an open cow over winter is going to cost you? The peace country seems to be in better conditon feed wise than the rest of western canada however a feed shortage makes preg checking and culling open cows a good option. That being said when there is a feed shortage and a large number of animals are being marketed in fall, prices tend to go down which has already been reflected this year.

Typically cull cow prices tend to be stronger in late winter/early spring therefore option #2 of preg checking and feeding cows separately (adding pounds on a thin open cow in fall) can be an attractive option if adequate feed is available.

There are various other economic factors that come into play when deciding if at all or when is best to market cull/open cows which I won't discuss in this article. However there is a great decision making tool for determining over winter costs/economics of preg checking for your specific herd that can be found at the Beef Cattle Research Council's website: www.beefresearch.ca.

Besides the cost factors preg checking also offers a lot of important herd management information.

Conception rates give you an idea of how reproductively fertile your herd is and may highlight some areas of deficiency in your herd management that could be improved. Generally in most cow herds that breed for 3 cycles we aim to have a conception rate of 90% or more. Ideally at least 75% catch within in the first cycle. A lot of herds keep bulls with cows for longer than 3 cycles and then one should aim to have an even better conception rate though I find that generally does not happen and rather leads to a spread out calving season that tends to get more stretched out every year.

Some herds due to the area they graze on summer pasture do not have the ability to pull their bulls, so bulls stay with cows till they come off summer pasture. With the sophistication of the ultrasounds we now use pregnancies less than 4 months along can be fairly easily aged. This makes early pregnancy testing a good option for these herds since we can help establish a cut off

and therefore cull cows that got bred too late or would otherwise be considered open had you pulled your bulls. As a disclaimer please note that though we are fairly accurate at determining fetal age in the early pregnancy there is still quite a bit of individual variation in when a cow will calve (give or take 2 weeks).

Identifying the early calvers in your group (the reproductively ideal group in your herd) allows you to select replacement heifers from that group. Herd reproductive diseases such as trichomoniasis may be found. Bull performance can also be evaluated when preg checking.

Putting each cow through the chute in fall allows you to identify/treat any health issues, update inventory/replace tags, administer vaccines or deworming and assess body condition scores/condition of each cow. This also a great time for you to discuss herd management with your veterinarian and ask them questions regarding concerns about individual cows.

With the new rules coming into effect December 1, 2018 you will require a valid veterinary client patient relationship (VCPR) to obtain medications from veterinary clinic. Preg checking your herd with your veterinarian is an excellent time to establish or update your existing VCPR relationship.

When booking your herd for a pregnancy testing cows should be minimum 40 days pregnant (40 days since bull was pulled). We also request your chute/handling system be in good working order and safe (if you ever want a vet to come back) and we prefer that cows are on water so their manure is not as dry (making it easier on the cow and your vet to get the job done). Ideally we would like the weather to be sunny and plus 10 °C but highly unlikely this time year. We ask that you not make fun of your veterinarian when they are as wide as they are tall from all the layers they are wearing to keep warm!

If you have further questions regarding preg checking your cow herd or how to make the experience most comfortable for your veterinarian please do not hesitate to contact us at the Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic!

