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BeefTalk: Fall and Pregnant Cows: Make Measurements Now

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The hot days of August gave way to the cooler days of September and, if you are like me, you are wondering how many of those cows are pregnant. There are no pounds weaned from open cows, and that is probably why you will often hear speakers talk about the overall importance of reproduction in the cow herd.

As discussed last week, pounds weaned per cow exposed is always important to track. However, very little can be changed immediately because this trait is made up of several factors. To start with, the cows need to be pregnant.

Before I talk about percentage of cows pregnant, I would like to talk about defined breeding programs. At the NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center, all cows are inseminated approximately the third week in May to calve by the end of February. Bulls are turned out for cleanup service within two to 12 days following AI and pulled within 45 days to assure that the cows are done calving by April 15. This allows the operation to process calves effectively prior to turnout on crested wheat grass pastures in early May (third leaf stage).

Bulls are returned to the pastures the first week of August to provide natural service for open cows that will be sorted and placed in the May-June calving group. Cows in this management group deliver calves on open pastures. The calves are on a different management plan.

To know if your breeding program is typical and up to par, it must be measured against benchmarks. For the last nine years, the cow herd at the Center has been compared against the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance Software (CHAPS) benchmarks. (Remember, these CHAPS benchmarks are the result of analysis from more than 185,000 cows.)

The pregnancy rates during the breeding seasons of 1989 and 1994 were low for the Center compared to the benchmark average of CHAPS producing cattle. Overall, the lowest year for CHAPS herds was the spring of 1996, almost 2 calves below the benchmark year of 1991 with a pregnancy rate of 94.9 percent. (Would we know the benchmark if data was not being collected?)

On the heels of a tough dry year, 1997 conceptions still were one full calf below the average CHAPS benchmarks following the very tough and long winter of that year. Even before summer arrived, the winter of 1997 had already stolen a calf from next year's calf crop for every 100 cows exposed to the bull that spring.

That's what makes analysis of beef records challenging. Producers want an immediate answer and often look to current management scenarios to identify a problem.

Data from the winter of 1997 indicates that, on the average, producers were one calf short in the spring of 1998 due to events 12 months earlier. In addition, a drop in pregnancy rate is more than likely a combination of several factors, including carryover effects, in this scenario, of the low 1996 breeding season.

On a positive note, the best breeding season was the spring of 1991 when 94.9 percent of the cows conceived for North Dakota CHAPS producers. That was also the best year for the Center at 96.2 percent conceived. The CHAPS averages have ranged from the 1996 low of 91.7 percent to the 1991 high of 94.9 percent.

For the Center, the breeding seasons of 1989 and 1994 were very poor.

Our current goal is to achieve a 93.5 percent pregnancy rate, which is the CHAPS benchmark. Overall, the Center is just under the benchmark. How does your herd compare? Can you beat the goal? More on that next time.

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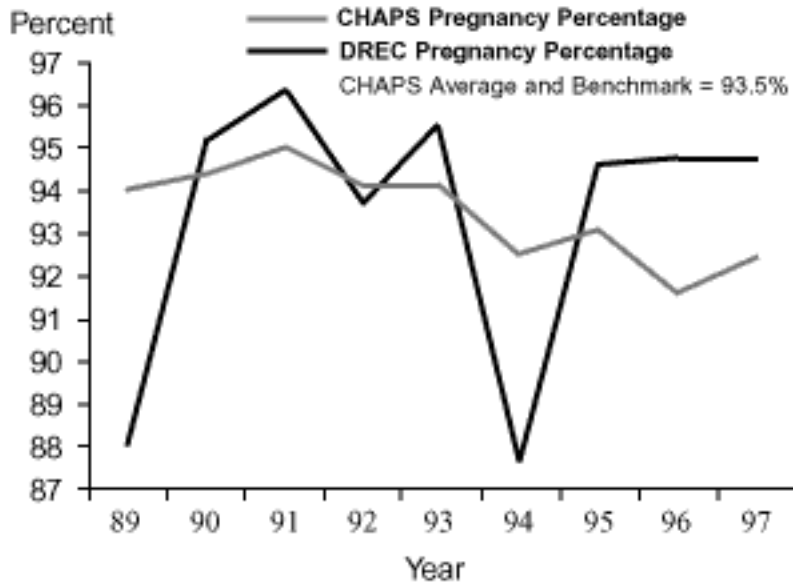
Your comments are always welcome at BEEFTALK.COM. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.COM. In questions or correspondence about information in this column refer to BT003.

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Percentage of Cows Pregnant in Fall

Based on data from the N.D. Beef Cattle Improvement Association.



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