

September 14, 2000



BeefTalk: Prepare Now for Future Calving Seasons

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There probably has not been a more talked-about or studied topic than open cows and how to prevent them.

I have come to realize that if a producer is really going to do much about open cows, now is the time. Why? Well, stop and think about it. When is the only time a cow is not doing much? In my book, that's just after she weans a calf.

For producers in the northern plains who calf from February through April, that would coincide with the upcoming late fall months. At the NDSU Dickinson Research Extension Center, mid-October to mid-November is weaning time.

In many cow herds, attention is given to calves at this time of the year. Meanwhile, cows are turned out to fend for themselves until the snow falls, generally around 30 days later. This time, however, is the opportunity to improve the condition of the cow. She is not nursing a calf. She should be in the middle third of gestation, and she is not fighting cold winter weather. These cows need energy to gain back some of that lost condition due to good production. They also need enough protein to effectively utilize the roughage.

Eliminate speculation. Weigh your cows at weaning and when you start winter feeding. Does your benchmark value show weight gain or loss? If they lost, you missed the one period of a cow's life when significant progress can be made to improve the condition of cows that need it.

The average pregnancy rate for herds using the Cow Herd Appraisal Performance System (CHAPS) is 92.9 percent for the last five years. The top third was at 94.4 percent, the middle third at 93.7 percent and the bottom third at 91.3 percent when herds were sorted based on age adjusted weight weaned per exposed female.

The significance of these statistics means herds that weaned the most weight per cow exposed had a 94.4 percent pregnancy rate. Top herds are ending the breeding season and starting the last trimester of pregnancy with three extra calves for every 100 cows. For our typical producers, that is more than nine calves.

Input costs have to be monitored so the costs don't exceed the value of the extra calves. A producer may overfeed and spend too much money, but that is not the norm.

CHAPS data show top producers will range from a 97.2 percent to a 91.6 percent pregnancy rate for cows in the fall. There will even be years when 100 percent of the cows are pregnant. This is quite different for the bottom producers who will range from 95.4 percent to 87.2 percent of cows pregnant in the fall.

In today's cattle business, 90 percent of cows pregnant should be the lower limit and 95 percent should be the goal. The center has only achieved that goal twice in this decade.

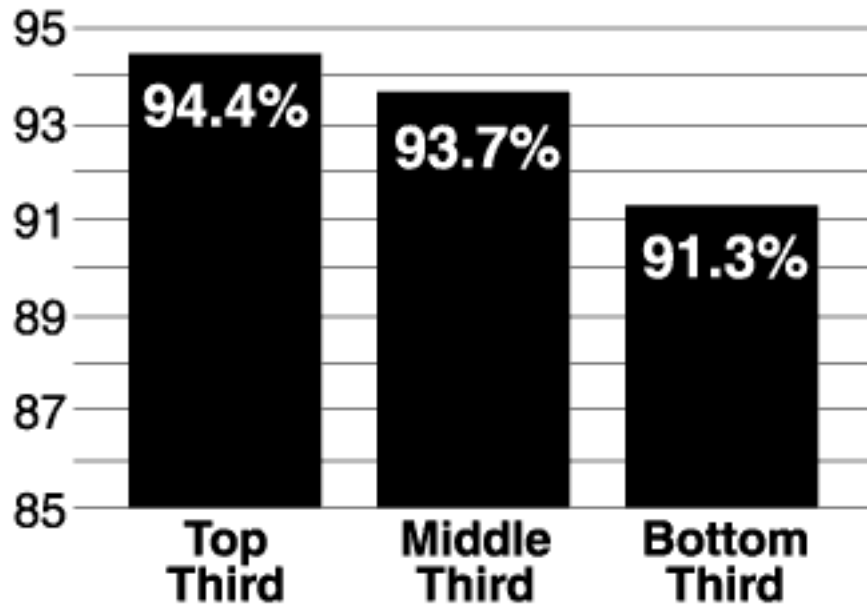
Don't blame poor spring weather for your calving rate. Work this fall to get back what those cows put into their calves this season. Bull failures and herd health can also be a problem, but first check the condition of the cows. If your pregnancy rate is lower than your goal, now is the time to adjust your management.

My advice: Pregnancy check those cows now, sort the thin cows off and feed them. Don't assume the medium to heavy cows can maintain themselves on dry fall pastures and crop land. Institute a program of forage checks, and provide a targeted nutritional program for all your cows. They will reward you next year at this same time.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT004.

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CHAPS Pregnancy Percentage



Herds sorted by age-adjusted weight weaned per exposed female.

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