Artificial Insemination Adds Value to Cow Herd

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Due to the considerable herd expansion that has occurred over the last three years, forecasters predict that 2017 and 2018 cattle markets will be considerably lower than even the transition that took place during the latter half of 2016. Only time will tell, but cattle producers are pretty resilient, and most have seen this market transition before. A silver lining to keep in mind about this one is that we are transitioning from all-time record calf prices in 2014-2015. Hopefully, cow-calf producers took advantage of those market conditions to identify areas of opportunity to address as prices soften and are willing to implement measures that can either reduce costs or increase revenues in the event that we do need to buckle down due to choppy markets.

One such area that has potential to add

continued on next page
value to a cow-calf operation is the implement-
mentation of an artificial insemination (AI)
program. This topic is not a new one, but I find
very few commercial producers, regardless of
size, actually implement AI as a management
tool to improve herd performance and revenue
generation. The reasons are varied and in many
instances ultimately appropriate. However, the
sentiment of “I have never done it,” or “It looks
too hard,” oftentimes rules the overall deci-
sion-making process and the potential benefits
are left untapped.
Depending upon the individual situa-
tion, arguably the biggest benefit in utilizing
AI is access to superior genetics as AI studs
are selected. Electronic databases, available
through many of the breeding services sup-
pliers, can be easily sorted based upon a pri-
oritized list of genetic traits that are specific
to your operation. Oftentimes, this results in
access to AI studs that wouldn’t otherwise be
available with greater genetic predictably than
is available when purchasing younger, relatively
unproven natural service sires.
Doing so leads to another important
potential benefit of AI, which is the possibility
for the AI event to target specific traits in sub-
sequent offspring such as replacement quality
and/or carcass merit, and the cleanup event
to target paternal endpoints such as weaning
and/or yearling weight. The result will be heifer
calves that are born early in the
calving season and possess the
maternal traits
desirable to either
go back in the
herd or market as
replacements as
well as later born
calves that pos-
sess the growth
potential to over-
come their lack of
age and still wean
at an acceptable
weight.
Accompa-
ning the AI
program, con-
sider whether to
inseminate based
upon standing
heat or at a
timed interval.
The vast majority
of commercial
operations elect to implement a synchroni-
zation program and inseminate at a speci-
fied interval within the resulting heat cycle.
Realistically, only expect around 50 percent
conception from the timed AI event. But, by
synchronizing you should get more females
bred earlier during the cleanup period.
Keep in mind there are several different
synchronization programs; they are specific
to whether mature cows or heifers are the
target animal and whether they are English or
Brahman influenced. Implementing the appro-
priate estrus synchronization program and
not synchronizing more animals than you can
breed at any one interval are important points
to learn from others’ mistakes as opposed to
making them yourself. An extremely helpful
tool in implementing an AI program/protocol
is the “Estrus Synchronization Planner” offered
through Iowa State University at
www.iowabeefcenter.org/estrussynch.html.
Although there are other potential reasons
(e.g., costs, labor availability, AI technician
access, desire, etc.) that would yield AI infea-
sible, in my estimation there is really only one
true deal breaker: if an individual operation
doesn’t have access to working facilities that
are safe to both personnel and animals. AI
technicians are similar to many veterinari-
ans in that they can do a lot with very few
resources in the form of fancy pens, yet if the
basic functionality of your working pens is
in question then definitely use the adequate
number of bulls. It will make everybody hap-
pier, including the bulls.