

Ask the Vet: What should I do with my cows prior to calving, and why is it so important?

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There is a lot to this subject, but I will try to briefly present our general pre-calving recommendations and emphasize the importance of these factors. Obviously, the main goal of a cattle producer is to make a profit. As the primary income source is selling pounds of calf to market, the producer wishes to raise the maximum number of calves for a given number of cows. He or she also strives for vigorous, healthy calves that grow well, as bigger calves at market equals more money in the bank.

A cow is going to eat every day, even if she does not produce a calf. The cost to keep a cow around for a year varies greatly from state to state, as well as from farm to farm. Some older data suggest this cost at \$300 to \$500 per cow per year. With feed costs increased in the last couple of years, this number could be higher. This is the main reason we recommend pregnancy testing cows, especially early in gestation. The cow carries her calf for approximately 9 months, and we can easily detect a fetus by 2 to 3 months along. If you can save 6 months of feed by culling an open cow at this time, that can add up to \$250 or more in your pocket. But what is the point of preg checking now as we are approaching calving season? Why not wait until everyone else calves and then see who is open? Even if we are 2 months away from the start of calving, and your calving season lasts 60-90 days, culling an open cow now rather than when everyone else is done calving could save you close to \$200 per cow.

A pre-calving vaccination protocol is also important for a couple of reasons: 1) to protect the cow and her unborn calf and 2) to protect the calf after birth. The first product we use helps protect against many diseases that can cause abortion, as well as other manifestations such as respiratory disease. These include IBR, BVD, PI3, BRSV, Vibrio (also known as Campylobacter), and several strains of Leptospirosis. Annual boosters are necessary to maintain protection. If you have not experienced an abortion “storm”, just talk to someone who has. It is certainly costly and disheartening to lose those good calves before they are born. Another vaccine that we use contains several strains of pinkeye. For operations that typically have problems with pinkeye during the summer months, the vaccine is one component of management that can reduce the prevalence of the disease. We also use a pour-on product at this time to treat lice as well as internal parasites. Though not prevalent this time of year, worm loads on pastures can cause subclinical disease and reduce condition of cows and weight gain of calves.

The other vaccine that we highly recommend prior to calving is primarily to protect the health of the newborn calf. After birth, the cow passes on some immunity to her calf through the first milk, or colostrum. By giving a scour vaccine to the cow before calving, the antibodies built up in her body can then be passed on to the calf, and are very effective at preventing scours, or diarrhea. This is one of the most common ailments for calves pre-weaning, and also can be very costly. Death loss can be significant, again limiting the potential to make a profit. Treatment of calves can be expensive, and weight

gain is often lost. Even after recovery, the lining of the intestine can be damaged enough to limit growth throughout the animals life. One example suggests a 100 cow herd with 5% death loss and 20% incidence of disease can cost a producer over \$4,000! That's real money you could put in the bank.

Well, this got kind of long, but it's hard to cover all of these bases adequately in a short column. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at the vet clinic and we will try our best to answer them. This is a critical time for cattle producers and I wish them all a safe and productive calving season to come.