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Replacement or Feeder Heifer?

Looking back on my article selection of recent months, it appears that the topic of the replacement heifer continues to come up. This is of industry interest as the national cowherd continues to dwindle and drought plagues much of the United States. We are reaching a window of opportunity for those early spring bred heifers to conduct a pregnancy diagnosis and convert open replacements into feeder heifers. Let's jump in and look at the benefits of this approach.

Pregnancy can be diagnosed by palpation at 60 days, by ultrasound as early as 30 days and blood testing kits as early as 28 days of pregnancy. Early culling of open breeding heifers has several benefits to the cow-calf operational bottom line. In addition to reducing grazing pressure on pastures there are several other long-term benefits to the cowherd.

Different percent of mature body weight targets for heifers at breeding, range from 55 to 65% depending on the producer's management system. Regardless of this initial target weight, if the females have a developed and functioning reproductive tract, the yearling heifer is at the easiest point in her life to conceive. Typically, it is recommended to have a short breeding season of 45 to 60 days to challenge heifers to conceive early. For the females that don't, there are benefits of converting them from replacement females to feeder heifers.

Improving the long-term reproductive performance of the cowherd is one of the major benefits. Reproductive traits are generally low in heritability; however, culling open heifers will improve the genetic potential for reproductive performance in the cowherd by eliminating sub-fertile heifers. Bred females and increasing percent of calf crop weaned is a critical economic factor in cow/calf operations.

Culling open heifers early yields the potential for them to be marketed as yearlings. At a younger age going on feed, they still have the potential to finish out in the young maturity group and have a better chance of harvesting in the Choice or Prime quality grade. If the operation doesn't finish cattle, these feeder type heifers are at a weight that has value in the auction market venues as well.

It is good management practice to breed heifers to calve prior to the mature cow herd. This allows more management to be focused on the heifer calving season and it's equally important to give them a little extra time to breed back and calve on schedule the following year. This can also allow forming calving groups based upon gestational stage and management of these groups.

One counter argument that has merit is that later bred females can be an equally important revenue stream and potentially gives more return on the heifer development cost. That is a valid argument but may not be creating the best cow for the herd, long-term. A wealth of research has shown that early calving heifers who persist in the herd past 5-6 years are the profit makers.

Having said all of this, be intentional in challenging the replacement heifer and have a plan to hold her accountable. Cull opens (or alternatively sell later bred) as soon as practical to save on feed bills, maximizing value capture and improve the cow herd fertility. Unfortunately, long-range forecast for summer moisture doesn't seem optimistic, so have a plan now to make culling decisions quickly.