

Focus on Fertility

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Growth traits and carcass quality are characteristics that cattlemen should select for as they attempt to improve the genetics of their herd. However, the characteristic that has the greatest influence on the profitability of your cow-herd is reproduction. From a standpoint of impact on your bottom line, reproductive traits are 5 times more important than growth traits and 10 times more important than carcass traits. My suggestion is to focus on the reproductive traits of your herd first by management that enhances fertility and through selection and culling. I have prepared a series of articles in which I discuss areas that I think will allow for improvement in your herd's productivity through improved fertility.

Herd fertility can be measured by calf crop percentage and by percentage of cows calving at different stages of the calving season. These parameters are dependent however on a multitude of factors including nutritional status of the herd, herd immunity to diseases that effect reproduction, bull fertility, cow fertility, heifer development, and calving season management. Each of these factors is in turn dependent on several factors, conditions, or management schemes that have an affect on them (good or bad). An example is nutritional status of the herd. It can be affected by pasture management, weaning management, supplemental feeding, pregnancy status, parasite control, and even subtle things like phenotype or breed make-up and the time of the year they calf. I will go into detail in each of these areas with the goal being that you will have some ideas that will help you make changes in your management that will in turn help you meet your goals for your cattle herd, which brings us to the first point.

To benefit the most from this it is important to make an assessment of where you are now and what your goals are. Also, and this is of crucial importance, carefully weigh the economic impact of every decision. There are many management tools that we can use to increase production, but only those that are cost effective are of interest to us. Of course the only way we can evaluate where we are now and in turn measure progress is to begin with a record keeping system. Where are you now? Look at the length of your calving season. Look at the percentage of calves that are born/ number of cows. How many bulls do you have? With respect to records, my feelings are the more simple, the better. All cows and calves must be identified. Record these facts: date calf born, breeding season dates (bull turnout and pullout), pregnancy status, body condition score of cows at pregnancy check time, and calf weaning weights. What are reasonable goals and under what circumstances do we alter them? Here are some numbers I'll throw out as management goals and the approach to them are different with each herd. A goal that you might have is 50-60% of calves born the first month of breeding season with an overall calving percentage of 90-95% for the season. A way of measuring herd productivity that combines in one number fertility and growth is with an equation that I have seen used by some veterinarians in the Midwest. It is percentage of the calf's weight and his dam's

weight times the herd's calving percentage. For example, the calf weighs 500 pounds, the cow weighs 1000 pounds, and the herd calving rate is 90%, the number would be **45%** ($500/1000=50\%$ & $50\% \times 90\%= 45\%$). This is actually highly correlated to cowherd efficiency. The point is wherever you are now and whatever goals you set, records are crucial in measuring your progress. Also, as you read the subsequent articles that specifically address different reproductive management tools or simply things that you could do differently, this is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Choose the management tools that works best for you and your operation and remember in our world (cattle raising) decreasing costs and efficiency reign.