

Cattle Pregnancy Checking Benefits And Limitations

BY JAKE GEIS, DVM
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I dislike freeloaders. It grinds my gears when there is an event going on and someone shows up just for the food, and then leaves before it's time to clean up. The same principal applies to my cow herd. If a cow is going to eat several hundred dollars in pasture and feed all year, she darn well better produce a saleable calf.

As ranchers, the best way to get rid of these freeloaders is to pregnancy check the herd during the first part of gestation. There are many advantages to doing this. However, we need to keep in mind there are limitations to pregnancy checking when it comes to aging the fetus, especially late in gestation.

Preg checking can be accomplished in three ways: rectal palpation, ultrasound, and through blood testing. Of the three, blood testing gives you the least amount of information because it gives no indication as to the age of the fetus. In addition, the results are delayed so the open cows will have to be identified and sorted out at a later time. Rectal palpation is the most commonly used method and can be used when the bulls have been out for at least 45 days. Ultrasound is the most precise method and can detect a fetus as young as 28 days of age.

Ultrasound is a great system to use for people that want to preg check as soon as possible. When looking at saving the most money on open cows, being able to identify the open cows sooner will reduce expenses the most. Depending on your breeding window, cows can be ultrasounded before bean harvest starts, fitting it into a more convenient time frame for some people.

The most important deadline to have your cows preg checked by is before the coldest part of winter. Shoot for January 1st for spring calving herds at the latest. This is because a cow will eat her most expensive feed in January and February, and eat a lot more of it so she can generate the heat to stay warm. Even with feed prices coming down, an open cow will eat away profits in these months without providing any revenue for the business.

Some might have their cows out on cornstalks at this time and figure it's not costing them any money, because the stocks are "free feed". There are two problems with this idea. First, I don't know many people whose cows eat only cornstalks all winter. They still get an energy and/or protein supplement, and they get some sort of mineral. Both of these cost money. Second, those stalks could be consumed by a cow that has a calf, which will actually produce a profit next spring.

Only keeping that cow that actually produces a calf will increase your profit beyond next spring. By eliminating the open cows, we stop keeping that cow around to see if she'll settle next time. According to Dr. Harlan Hughes, the cow/calf economist for *Beef Magazine*, in 2015 it will cost \$947 each year to own each cow. If she doesn't produce a calf this year, then she will have to recover that cost and the next year's cost to pay for herself. That makes the bold assumption she gets bred next year, which is a poor assumption. If she couldn't get bred the first year, why

would she breed next year?

Preg check is also a great time to take some measurements of your herd's status. For example, do you know how old your cows are? If not, as they go through the chute the cows can be mouthed to check their age. With this information, you can get a better estimate of how many replacement heifers you will need in the next few years. In addition, each cow can be assessed for their body condition. The thinner cows could then be sorted off to give them extra

feed and get back into ideal shape before the hardest months of winter. This works better than giving the whole herd extra feed, because the more aggressive cows will eat that feed before the thinner ones get a chance.

Even though pregnancy checking has all these benefits, it is important to remember there are limitations in regard to aging the cow's fetus. The fetal calf can only be aged with confidence in the first four to five months of gestation. This is because after this age the variations in size between calves make it difficult to age the fetus. Consider that one calf may be born at 60 pounds while another at 90 pounds. This difference starts to manifest itself in the second trimester. Therefore, if you have a group of cows to preg that are between five and eight months of gestation, establishing a "cut-off date" for calving via palpation at this point is at best an educated guess. If you really want this cut-off date, pregnancy check earlier when aging is more accurate.

When raising cattle, we work hard to earn our money. The last thing we need are ungrateful, freeloading cows eating feed and not producing a calf. By pregnancy checking the herd early, we can remove these cows from the herd and focus our energy on the cows that will raise a calf and generate revenue next fall.

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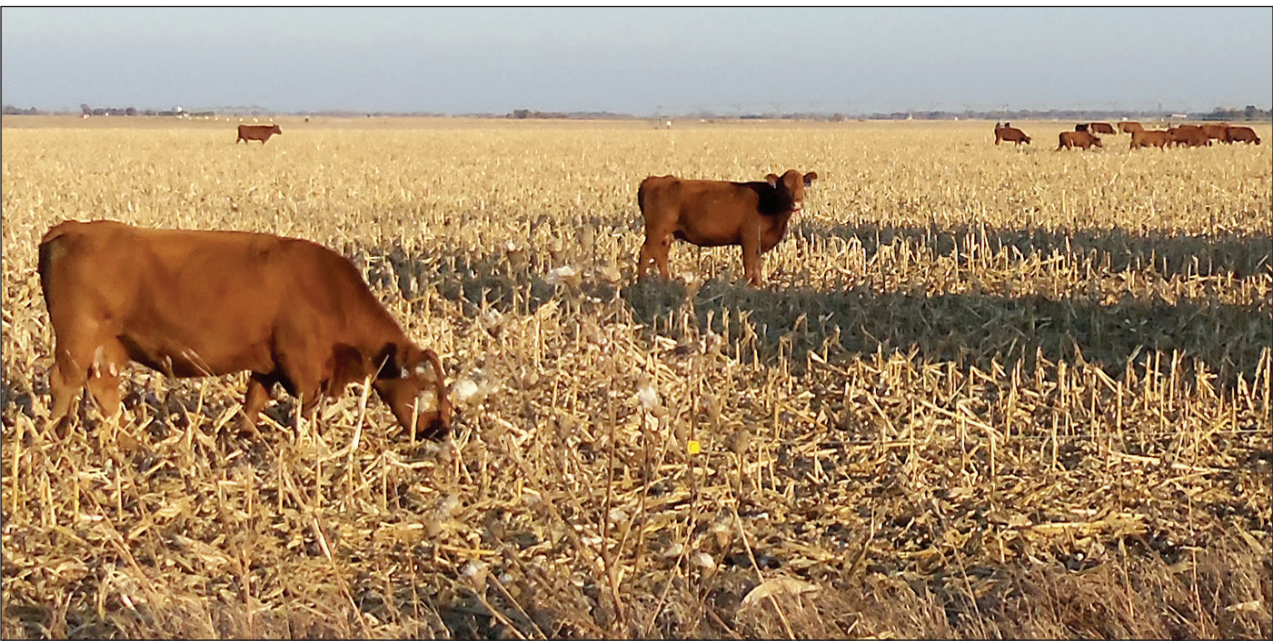


PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

When Disaster Strikes Livestock Evacuation In Case Of Disaster, Part 1: When Evacuation Is Appropriate

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a two-part series.

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Two years ago, an October blizzard slammed into South Dakota and Nebraska's panhandle, killing an estimated tens of thousands of livestock, mostly grazing cattle that froze to death piled together while seeking protection from wind-driven rain and heavy snow. It was a devastating scene to ranchers, many of whom lost more than half of their cow-calf herds.

While this extreme storm had no historical weather event on which to base their decisions, producers should take this as a warning of what could come in future decades as weather patterns change and become more unexpected due to global warming.

While a freak blizzard is nearly impossible to prepare for, with some natural disasters — such as flooding near the Missouri River or grass fires — it may be wise for livestock owners to evacuate their animals.

"Risk is the primary element," said Scott Cotton, University of Wyoming Extension agricultural systems educator in Casper, Wyoming, during an online practical livestock evacuation training hosted by the Extension Disaster Education Network. Cotton is chair-elect of EDEN.

"Vulnerability is an issue," he added. "Livestock evacuation is really dependent on the vulnerability that is out there."

When deciding whether evacuation is appropriate in a situation, Cotton said the producer needs to assess various aspects of the event occurring:

- Is it an event that has a warning? A tornado, for example, develops rapidly while flooding may be warned of hours or days ahead of time.
- How fast is the threat moving? Are the details of

the event's possible impact known? A grass fire 5 miles away on a day with a slight breeze is not as much of a concern as the same grass fire, the same distance, on a day with 50-mile-per-hour winds. In the same way, some grass fires are larger or on dry grass or located in areas with access by local fire crews, which would be much more of a risk than smaller fires that can be easily contained.

• Where is the location? A farm would require a much different evacuation plan than if animals are trying to be evacuated from a county fair.

• Is the farm prepared? An operation that has a plan in place, preferably with periodic drills, is more likely to be successful during an actual evacuation than one that has no plan.

Evacuations cannot be put together at the last second. Not only does the type of event occurring matter, Cotton said, but so does the evacuation team's expertise and coordination, time, accessibility, manpower, avail-

able equipment, infrastructure and relationships with county emergency managers. "Never take the wrong equipment to livestock rescues," Cotton said. "Even with the right equipment, it's hard."

Before considering a complete herd evacuation from the location, he said to first think about if there are any possible mitigation measures. Especially with big herds, it may work better to move the livestock from an area of high risk to one of less risk. A county emergency manager can help identify these on-farm safe sites, depending on the disaster at hand. For example, a high point on the farm may be the best spot to move a herd during flooding, or a pasture with a windbreak may be the best destination when a snowstorm threatens. "One thing that can happen during a disaster is that we can overestimate how far

we can move livestock and how many we can move," Cotton said. "If five trailers can move 100 cow-calf pairs 20 miles to safety in 2 hours, they may be able to move 200 pairs 4 miles to an area of less risk in the same time."

Even if livestock are loaded efficiently on the farm, evacuation time can be significantly delayed once the trailers move to the public roads. Debris, downed power lines, flooding, icy conditions and other vehicles on the roadways are all roadblocks to moving livestock quick enough to keeping the entire herd safe.

"There's always something that can pop up when things happen," Cotton said. "Evacuators need at least a 30-minute margin of error in case of vehicle breakdowns, livestock issues of changing weather conditions."

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