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Maximize Implants For Best Results In Beef Cattle

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Sustainability seems to be the current buzzword in agriculture. Major corporations, like McDonald's and Walmart, are taking steps towards defining what sustainability means in food production. A key component of that definition is using our limited natural resources in the most efficient manner possible. Another component is that sustainable practices need to be economical for farmers and ranchers, because a management change that is significantly unprofitable will push a large increase in food costs on to consumers, which disproportionately affects the poor the most.

With this in mind, growth implants fit both components nicely. According to data published by the University of Missouri, using a single implant (the product Ralgo in this case) used in a beef steer will conserve over 900 gallons of water and 150 pounds of feed. This benefit occurs without compromising the safety of the final beef product, with safety data from the FDA stretching back several decades to back it up. In addition, the increased efficiency provides an economic incentive for cattlemen to use implants.

The question that is in the mind of cattle feeders is how much incentive are we talking about? According to Kansas State Extension data, when fed to the same level of back fat, steers on a moderate implant program will put on 86 more pounds of body weight than non-implanted steers. On an aggressive program, that number jumps to 97 pounds. This happens while we use less feed per pound of body weight gained.

Implants are not a feedlot exclusive product. When used at branding or spring turnout, Virginia Tech Extension reports that calves will be 15 to 20 pounds heavier at weaning than non-implanted calves. Bull calves cannot be implanted, but heifer calves at this age can be implanted with no adverse effects on their reproductive capabilities later in life. Therefore, to take full advantage of a calfhood implant, castrate the bulls in the spring and implant the entire group. This will decrease the stress on your steers at weaning time, since they are not having to undergo castration at the same time, thereby reducing the number of sick calves and your antibiotic usage.

The only downside to using implants is that they will have a negative effect on your percentage of choice cattle. This is due to the tendency to increase protein production over fat in the muscle. However, unless you sell on a grid that rewards you for higher marbling scores, you are essentially giving your high choice and prime cattle to the packer for free by not implanting. If the packer wants you to maximize marbling, it would be wise to make the packer pay you for it.

When looking at getting paid for your cattle, a concern that some voice with using implants is the loss of their natural premium. While it is easy to see the extra $5 to $10 per hundred at the barn, focusing on this premium ignores several other factors. First, it took more feed per pound to create that natural animal, increasing your feed costs. It also doesn't account for the additional weight that would have been sold on the implanted animal. Since it would take north of $10/cwt to make up the difference for not implanting, are you willing to take that risk at the sale barn? The only time it makes sense to sell natural is to have them on a program that guarantees your premium, and rewards you for more prime and choice carcasses.

When implanting cattle, in order to get the full effect of the implant it is critical to do it in a sterile fashion. Place the implant on the backside of the ear just under the skin, right in the middle of the ear. Since this is the spot where people often like to tag calves, you may need to work around a tag hole, or better yet put the tag towards the bottom or outside of the ear instead. Before implanting a calf, wipe the needle aggressively on a sponge or rag soaked in an antiseptic solution. This will remove any foreign material and sterilize the needle before inserting it into the animal. Don't sacrifice good technique for speed, as every botched implant will cost a few dozen dollars in lost pounds and extra feed.

As cattle producers, we spend a great deal of our time making long-term changes that positively affect our sustainability, like upgrading to safer handling facilities or establishing better grasses. However, we don't see a return on these investments for several years. Implants give us a positive return on this year's cattle in addition to helping us use our resources more efficiently. If a management technique makes our feedlot or ranch more sustainable and makes us money this year, it makes sense to use it in our cattle.

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There Are Many Reasons To Consider Late Summer/ Early Fall Alfalfa Seeding

BROOKINGS – Seeding of alfalfa is under way throughout northeastern South Dakota.

"Because alfalfa is a perennial crop, as long as it is established by the time of the first frost, it will regrow during the following year," said Karla Hernandez, SDSU Extension Forages Field Specialist. "Because the plant is established in the fall, it is able to take advantage of early spring soil moisture - and growers don't have to spend time planting alfalfa in the spring where they are busy with other field work."

As a result, Hernandez said compared to traditional spring planting, those producers in the Upper Plains who plant alfalfa in the fall enjoy much higher yields and more cuttings the following growing season.

Hernandez outlines a number of additional benefits to fall planting alfalfa below:

* Lower weed pressure: Due to the dry soil conditions of a typical fall, weed problems are usually considerably reduced. Additionally, any annual weeds that are established are typically killed in the fall by the first killing frost.

* Labor saving: With the late summer/fall season offering more time to work the soil and prepare for planting, seeding operations usually experience fewer problems and higher percentages of establishment in a well prepared seedbed.

* Improved soil health: Many fields are prone to wind and water erosion over the prolonged winter season. Alfalfa planted late-summer or fall, functions as a cover crop preventing erosion and helping to maintain and improve soil health.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH LATE SUMMER/EARLY FALL PLANTING OF ALFALFA

Although there are several benefits to late summer/early fall seeding of alfalfa, Hernandez said there are some risks associated:

• Limited fall moisture: Moisture is typically limited during the fall. "Producers who intend to plant alfalfa should evaluate their soil conditions and assure that moisture is adequate to support the intended seeding," Hernandez said.

• Winter injury: If the plant is not adequately established before the first killing frost, winter injury is possible. "Producers who intend to commit to a fall seeding should consult with their seed provider about germination and growth times, to assure that the plant will be well established before the first frost," Hernandez said.

A general recommendation for the planting of alfalfa in this region is that it should occur by mid-August. "This allows at least six-weeks for the plants to become established with a good crown structure before the first frost," she said. "However, based on the expected killing frost dates for 2015, planting alfalfa before the end of September looks like a good option for growers this fall."

Hernandez said the presence of a crown structure above the ground assures that some cover will be provided to insulate the roots as well as adequate carbohydrate storage within the root structure to support spring regrowth.

FROST DETECTION TOOL

SDSU Extension has been tracking frost/freeze dates across the state. Producers can access an online frost detection tool http://climate.sdstate.edu/w_info/frost/frost.shtm.

"Producers should consult this website in conjunction with their seed provider to assure that they have enough time for their planting to gain maturity," Hernandez said.

In general, most producers in South Dakota should expect the first frost (temperatures drop to 32 degrees Fahrenheit) to occur in late-September with the first hard-killing frost (when temperatures drop to 28 degrees Fahrenheit) to occur in early-October.

Tips On Re-Breeding Your Open Cows to Add Value

BROOKINGS — The time to process fall-weaned calves and determine pregnancy rates among cows will soon be here. Management of open cows is critical to the financial bottom line of a cow/calf operation, said Julie Walker, Associate Professor & SDSU Extension Beef Specialist.

"It is estimated that 15 to 20 percent of a cow-calf enterprise revenue comes from cull cows," she said. "Determining open cow(s) early allows producers to select the best strategies which target the highest potential revenue."

Once open rates are determined, Walker explained that cattle producers are faced with a few decisions. "They can either sell the open cows right away, feed them out or re-breed them."

REBREEDING OPEN COWS

Another option Walker encourages producers to look at is re-breeding open cows before taking them to the sale barn.

"Bred cows typically bring more money than cull cows," she explained. "These newly bred cows would target fall-calving cowherds — and the number of fall-calving herds appear to be increasing in South Dakota."

If higher than normal open rates occur, Walker said producers need to work with their veterinarian to determine the potential cause.

Breeding-long season pregnancy rates are usually in the range of 94 to 98 percent. Pregnancy rate is calculated by total number pregnant during the breeding season/number of females exposed to breeding (expressed as a percent).

Walker explained that "normal" pregnancy rates are influenced by several factors including:

1. Length of breeding season;
2. Body condition score of cows;
3. Bull-to-cow ratios; and
4. Health status of bull(s) as well as other factors.

"So remember to compare pregnancy rate only within your own herd," Walker said.

Is re-breeding the right option for my operation?

When determining if re-breeding open cows is the right option for your operation, Walker said there are a few questions to consider:

***Are bulls available for a second breeding season?**

Using bulls for a second breeding season is often accomplished when producers have both a spring- and fall-calving herd.

***What is the cost of retaining these open cows through a second breeding season?**

Using the $1.30 cost per day, should include most expenses such as feed, labor, interest, and utilities.

***What is the potential income from the bred cow?**

"Remember not all open cows would fit this program, evaluate each cow to determine if it should remain in any producer's program," Walker said.

Cull cows often include more than open cows such as those with one or more of the following issues:

1. Poor performance;
2. Bad udder;
3. Temperament;
4. Bad eyes;
5. Age;
6. Structural soundness; and
7. Health concerns.

"A simple cost analysis of this system would be bred cow value minus open cow value," Walker said. "If the difference is higher than the cost of breeding/feeding/etc., it is a profitable system."

However, if the difference is lower, Walker said this may not be the year to utilize this management system.

She shared the following example: Retaining cows for 90 days at $1.30 per day, would require the bred cow value to be $117 higher than the open cow. If a producer retained the open cows for rebreeding for 120 days the difference would need to be $156. This calculation did not include the cost for bull use.

"Re-breeding open cows will change the value compared to open cows, however, each producer needs to determine if this change is positive," Walker said.

Walker reminds producers that within South Dakota there is a regulation that "no non-virgin and non-pregnant female cattle may be imported, loaned, leased, nor acquired for breeding purposes in South Dakota."

To learn more about this regulation, visit the S.D. Animal Industry Board website.