



Staying ahead of reproduction

Record keeping is a key component in making sure all cows enter their breeding management phase on time

LAST SUMMER I WAS hired as a reproduction consultant, which gave me the opportunity to visit many different farms and several different veterinary practices.

I was not hired to sell a product or a program but rather to help producers (alongside their veterinarians) use whichever program they were using, with whichever products, to its full advantage. Overall, the goal of the project was to improve reproduction in each herd, realizing that this is the key to average daily milk production, average number of days in milk and the time interval between successive calvings - all of which contribute to your bottom line.

Most importantly, the success of reproduction on a farm depends on management and record keeping. Although most producers I have spoken to admit that record keeping is not their best quality, it is necessary to make everything work.

My goal this summer was to get producers to realize where they were in terms of reproduction numbers, where they wanted to be, and to make a plan to get them there.

Some quick tips that were used this summer:

A lack of heat detection leading to insemination is the number one reason for low reproduction numbers. This is an area that can be improved greatly by increasing observation time or using such tools as synchronization protocols, pedometers, tailhead markers, etc.

Even though most look for it at chore time, cows are often busy doing other things instead of showing signs of heat. Try popping into the barn for a few minutes before lunch or in the middle of the day to observe cows when they aren't preoccupied.

Decide on a voluntary waiting period that suits you but also takes into consideration the number of breedings it takes for a typical pregnancy. Although some like to wait 90 days until they enrol cows to be bred, in this system some cows may not come into heat until 110 days and if

this is the first breeding, then it will be 130 days before the next possible breeding (provided you observe each heat). In other words, you are progressively extending your calving interval past efficiency.

Instead, try enrolling cows so that they will be bred for the first time by 90-100 DIM which means that you would need to start managing them at 70-75 DIM.

When you enter a calving date, record in your calendar the date that the cow is to be enrolled in the breeding program. This way she is already in the calendar and you are reminded without having to remember to go and see how far along she is. Most do not realize how quickly time passes until they are already behind on enrolling cows.

If you have a computer program for your herd - use it to its full capacity. It can be checked daily for numbers, injections lists, upcoming calvings and other details.

If you are using a synchronization protocol, develop a weekly schedule you can use routinely and group your injections to minimize the number of days you are injecting and breeding.

Look at your numbers: pregnancy rate, heat detection rate and conception rate. You don't know how well or poorly you are doing until you check these. Consult your veterinarian to establish goals of where you would like to be and how to get there.

In the end, the changes will result in shorter calving intervals due to timely breeding, and subsequently more time spent in the early, most profitable phase of lactation.

If it was possible to get producers to try different approaches to reproduction this summer in the height of crop season with great results, I challenge you to commit those extra few minutes a day to reach your reproduction goals and reap the benefits.

Thank you to all those producers who allowed me to work with them and readily accepted me as a student. 

[The writer is a student in the OVC Class of 2010 and a student representative to the Ontario Association of Bovine Practitioners]