

# **The Economics of Pregnancy Testing Your Herd**

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In the fall, producers have a long to-do list on their operations. These may include things like crop harvest, manure application, weaning, and herd vaccination. However, this is the year to consider adding another item to your to-do list, if you are not already doing it, pregnancy checking your cow herd and replacement heifers.

There are a few options for pregnancy testing your cattle. You can have your veterinarian check the cattle using rectal palpation or ultrasound. Both methods can give you an idea of calving date and provide immediate results. It also allows your veterinarian to see the herd to pick up any potential disease problems. Seasoned practitioners are 99%+ accurate on both palpation and ultrasound. Ultrasound has the additional benefits of allowing for assessment of calf viability and sexing the calf if done during the correct period of gestation. However, this additional information may also come with an additional fee. Another option is a blood test. Blood can be drawn from the cattle for testing using a test kit provided by the laboratory and must be sent to the laboratory for analysis. The blood test is about 93% accurate on pregnant cows (~7% of pregnant cows will be called open) and 99% accurate on open cows. The blood test does not give you any information about calving date, calf viability, reasons for open cows, or potential disease issues. It also can take up to a week for results to come back, so cattle will need to be rehandled if open cows are to be culled. However, this may be the most economic option in a small herd that is far removed from a veterinary clinic.

There are many benefits of regular pregnancy exams from a herd health and management perspective. Pregnancy testing your cattle will provide you with calving dates. This information can be used to calculate measures of herd reproductive efficiency, such as % bred in the first 21 days of the breeding period, and give you a list of animals to watch closely during specific times in your calving period. It also allows for determination of fertility of the bull and is a good time to look for potential disease or nutritional issues in the herd. Identifying nutritional concerns (i.e. thin cows) at this time of the year allows for corrections to be made before the next calving cycle. Cows that are thin at calving will also be thin at breeding. This decreases the likelihood of pregnancy. It is much easier and less expensive to put weight on cows prior to calving than while they are nursing a calf. It also allows for open cows to be culled before incurring the expenses of wintering them.

With the low beef prices that we are seeing currently, another consideration is the potential economic benefit to your operation. Generally, we see an increase in beef price in the spring, as there are less cattle on the market at this time. Lately, we have also been seeing yearly increases in price. These two in combination meant that selling open cows in the spring when they failed to calve made economic sense, as the increased price offset the cost of over-wintering the open cow. However, the beef price is on the decline and is projected to decline into 2017. This means over-wintering beef cows is not the best

economic decision on many operations this year. Generally, if the cull cow price is below \$1.02/lb in the fall, it is time to look at the specific economics of pregnancy exam on your herd. Since the average price last week was about \$0.75/lb, pregnancy exam may make economic sense on many operations. Open animals may then be culled or managed separately to increase their weight before sale in the spring. The Beef Cattle Research Council has a good resource for determining the economics of these options based on information from your operation, The Economics of Pregnancy Testing Beef Cattle Model (<http://www.beefresearch.ca/economicmodel/pregnancy-detection.cfm>). You can also find more information at <http://www.beefresearch.ca/resources/webinars.cfm> which includes a webinar about the Economics of Pregnancy Detection. Discuss your options with your veterinarian to determine what is the best fit for your operation.