

## **Pregnant Feedlot Heifers – Who Is To Blame?**

**Dr. Rebecca Cornell**

The clinic phone rings, a feedlot heifer is hiplocked and the producer needs assistance. Upon arrival the heifer is unable to stand with a dead calf stuck half out. The heifer has obviously been working at it for a while. Despite her exhaustion and suspected nerve damage she is convinced she can kill us if she tries hard enough. This situation is far too common in beef feedlots and is a lose-lose-lose situation for all parties involved. This particular case had a relatively “good” outcome with the heifer responding to treatment and was eventually able to stand again. Unfortunately, not all of these cases will have a positive ending.

It is estimated that 2-15% of feedlot heifers are pregnant upon arrival and in recent years this figure appears to be increasing. As the beef industry selects for genetics that lead to early puberty as a means to recoup rearing expenses and get replacement females in the herd, we have inadvertently created a situation where heifers can become pregnant too early. What are the possible outcomes when this occurs? For the cow-calf operator it leads to a heifer that is undersized from diverting energy to a pregnancy rather than growth. Not only does this set her up for a high risk of dystocia, but it will also cause her to become out of sync with the rest of the cow herd, assuming she survives the complicated labour. Pregnant heifers in a feedlot setting are even more likely to experience trouble as these heifers are on a ration that will both lay down fat in the birth canal, and create large, high birth weight calves. If they are able to deliver the calf, it carries a high risk of dystocia and calving injury, whereas others will proceed to C-section or euthanasia. Even if the pregnancy is detected early at the feedlot, there is the cost of treating them, decreased feed efficiency and decreased carcass quality. All of these issues directly affect the price feedlot buyers are willing to pay for heifers; especially if they have experienced issues in the past with heifers from a certain region or source.

Prevention is the most important tool and this starts with cow-calf producers taking some responsibility. Well-grown heifers can begin cycling as early as six months old, so it is important for the cow-calf producer to pull the bull to ensure these heifer calves are never exposed and don't get pregnant. It is important to realize that the same genetic selection for early puberty has also improved the fertility of bull calves, so it is more than the breeding bull heifer calves have to be protected from. Best management practices would be to band bull calves at birth, but please ensure you can account for two testicles. I've encountered scrotal amputations on bull calves that were banded at birth that left the testicles behind. These bulls can still breed!

Some of you are probably wondering, what all of this concern is about when prostaglandin can be administered at weaning or upon arrival to abort these pregnancies. This strategy is a good start but understanding the limitations of this product is important. Prostaglandin is only effective 90% of the time. It also doesn't cause abortion if the heifer was very recently bred (less than 10 days) or if the pregnancy is greater than 100 days gestation. Therefore, administration of this product is not a perfect solution. The best prevention is managing your heifer calf and stocker groups appropriately to ensure they are never exposed to a bull.

If despite our best efforts we are left with very pregnant feedlot heifers, shipping the animals to slaughter ASAP is sometimes recommended in order to avoid the complications that comes along with trying to calve in a feedlot. The ethics of this approach can be debated; additionally, the mental toll endured by slaughterhouse workers ought to be considered, as they will be given the task of

potentially euthanizing a calf on the kill plant floor. If all of those considerations are not enough, it is important to acknowledge the new CFIA transport regulations which prohibit the transportation of animals in the last 10% of gestation.

I recognize that encouraging preventative strategies this time of year is not prudent as most heifers are handled in the fall. However, it is important to keep in mind that from now through to July, feedlot operators are dealing with fat heifers calving that were bred last summer and fall due to mismanagement at another farm. Please consider taking preventative steps to ensure your non-replacement heifers do not become my next feedlot calving nightmare.

#### Take Home Messages:

1. Puberty in some beef breeds is occurring earlier, increasing the risks of unwanted pregnancies. Pull the bull, consider castrating bull calves at a young age (ideally at birth), and administer prostaglandin to heifer calves.
2. Prostaglandin is not 100% effective. Know the limitations and use as directed by your veterinarian.
3. Late term pregnancies in feedlot heifers become major problems due to risk of dystocia, lack of appropriate calving facilities, and disposal options.