

Cow Calf Practice in the Midwest

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I am a veterinarian in Wyoming, IL. I started at this practice and have been there 29 years. My partner, Dr. Lynn Keller and Associates Dr. Derek McFarland and Dr. Janelle McFarland work in a 4 person mixed practice.

We are located in North Central Illinois, 30 miles northwest of Peoria, IL. We work with many cow calf herds, purebred, club calf, and commercial. Herd sizes are from 20 to 300 cows. There are a few small feedlots, dairy clients, hogs, horses, small animals and a few exotics.

I spend most of my time with cow/calf herds. We are near the Illinois River so there is some good pasture ground. Corn and soybeans are still most important so cattle herds are generally not the primary source of income, but a way to utilize rough ground and other feed sources. There are several ethanol plants in the area so wet gluten feed is available year round. The price fluctuates greatly so many clients buy and store it in bunkers. Corn silage is also a major feed source.

I have enjoyed general practice and hope to keep doing it for several more years. As one of my clients told me "he finally figured out why they call it practice, because you have been practicing on my animals for all these years."

The older partner I started with gave me some very valuable advice.

1. Veterinary practice will keep you humble.
2. Every animal you ever see will die: sometimes we prolong it and sometimes we hurry it up, but learn all you can and go on.

Learn to be a good listener, your clients know their animals if you can interpret their history. We do not miss things by not knowing, we miss because of not looking, listening, hearing and smelling.

I would like to present a case from a few years ago. I have been working with this herd since 1994. It started with 50 cows and is currently at 200 cows and calve out 40 heifers annually. It is a commercial herd, Angus base and crossed with Gelbvieh to produce F1 females. The herd is well managed, nutrition is top notch and the herd is tracked on cow sense records.

The first year conception rates were 85% on a 70 day breeding season. Several of the open cows were 5-6 years old and in body score 5 plus to 6 condition. Blood samples were taken on 10 of the open cows (125 in herd at the time).

Virus SN (serum neutralization) titers for IBR and BVD were checked and several samples were 1:512 or greater for IBR and BVD. The herd had been using all killed virus vaccines once a year up to this point.

At calving one third of the cows calved the first three weeks of the calving period. About one third calved the second three weeks, and the last third was strung out for the last forty days of the calving season.

The following year all cows were vaccinated with Modified Live Virus Vaccine after calving and before breeding. Bulls were semen checked and turned out for 70 days. The next calving season, over one hundred cows calved the first three weeks of the calving season, and at the end of two cycles, all but six cows had calved. The producer was elated with the results. He was busy calving, but he was done sooner and had calving done before he began field work. Also, calving earlier in the calving season is usually two pounds heavier per day of age. This is a herd that sells feeder calves so by getting cows to calve one cycle earlier means 30-40 pounds more weight to sell in the fall with the same costs and inputs. We were able to repeat this the next several years.

Now the humble part. All cows were pregnancy checked in September of 2000. The producer at that time had 180 cows. Late November, one group of ninety cows started aborting. From Thanksgiving until mid December 16 cows aborted. Fetuses were sent to the lab with no definitive diagnosis found. All cows were vaccinated twice yearly for Lepto. The following year (2001) the same scenario happens. Cows started aborting after Thanksgiving. Neospora was not found in the fetuses the previous year but was high on the list of rule outs for the abortions. After discussing options with the producer, it was decided to test all cows to diagnose the abortion problem. The cows were ear punched for BVD PI animals, and all were bled for Neospora, Johnes, and Leukosis virus.

The results of the testing were a bit surprising. All cows were negative for BVD – PI, Johnes, and Leukosis. Most herds in Illinois are put together herds with many purchased cows as was this herd. Forty % of the cows had medium to high titers for Neospora. Although we had our diagnosis, we still had to decide if the "New" vaccine would be economically feasible. The vaccine was used the following year according to label directions. All cows and heifers were vaccinated. Abortions dropped to 5 the next year. Any cows with Neospora titers initially that did not breed were culled. The cost of vaccine is substantial but results were much more economical than abortions.

The future plan we are following now is to vaccinate all heifers with Neospora, and drop vaccinations on the cows. This has kept abortions rates at 1-2% on 200 cows. The quandary with Neospora is the best

way to eliminate it is to test and sell positives. In this herd we would have had to junk out a good portion of the genetics so vaccination was chosen and fortunately worked well.

Our practice uses an acronym for our cull cow list called the GHATT cow list for bad udders, opens, bad attitudes, and other problems. This stands for Get Her A (butt) To Town!

Bovine practice can be challenging and very enjoyable. As one long time Illinois Veterinarian commented;

any veterinarian can work with good clients but it takes a real veterinarian to work with the Tough Clients!

I would like to wish all of you the best in your veterinary careers and hope it will be in Bovine Medicine.

You will know you made it as a real veterinarian when you join the VWHST society. (That stands for Veterinarians Who Have Spayed Tom Cats!)

Thank you and best of luck to all of you!!!