

Pregnancy Diagnosis 101

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For most everybody in Alamance County, the fall breeding season is over, calves are weaned and will be marketed soon, but let's not forget about those brood cows. At weaning, or shortly after is a great time to pregnancy check your cows. In today's market, you cannot afford to have an open cow in your herd.

There are several methods available for pregnancy checking. The most common method is palpation, where the technician (usually a veterinarian) palpates the reproductive tract determining if a fetus is present. You can also learn from the technician valuable information such as how many days bred the cow is to determine a more accurate calving date and if there are any problems with the reproductive tract. Palpation should be done 35-40 days post breeding for best results.



Photo Credit: Beef Magazine

Another method gaining popularity in the beef cattle realm (still very new to our area) is ultrasound. Ultrasound still requires rectal palpation but can detect pregnancy as early as 30 days post breeding. Also, sexing can be done 60 to 90 days post breeding to determine if the calf is going to be a heifer or a bull.

Lastly, you can determine pregnancy by taking a blood sample. For this method, you take a blood sample (usually from the tail vein) and send it off to a commercial laboratory for results. Within a matter of days, sometimes even the next day, the lab will send back results for each individual female. This method works by detecting a molecule in the blood called a pregnancy specific glycoprotein (PAG). These PAGs are only produced by a placenta. So, if used correctly and PAGs are present in the cow or heifer's blood, that

female is pregnant. Blood pregnancy tests can be used as early as 28-30 days after breeding (depending on the lab and their specific assay). It is important to realize that PAGs can stay in the cow's blood for as much as 80 days after calving.



So, taking the blood sample too early can lead to a false positive test result. These tests are very accurate but might result in an occasional false positive where the cow/heifer is called pregnant but does not calve. Most often, the female was actually pregnant when the sample was taken, but loses the pregnancy before calving. The same thing can happen with the other methods of pregnancy determination.

A common question is: "How much does it cost to pregnancy check cows?" Prices for palpation are different among technicians and between methods. Ultrasound is usually more expensive than manual palpation and the blood test is relatively inexpensive per sample. But, a more appropriate question is: "How much does it cost NOT to pregnancy check cows?" Especially for small herd operators, where hay and supplemental feed are more expensive from being purchased or made on a smaller economy of scale, feeding open cows or heifers is extremely wasteful. Consider this; it can cost as much as \$650 a year to maintain a commercial cow. If a cow does not produce a calf, that investment turns into lost profit potential. It does require additional investment to replace open cows. However, that should be weighed against its salvage value and recouped resources, not just the purchase price of replacements.

"Preg. checking" is a good investment and NOT doing so actually costs more than paying to get it done. You will almost certainly find that it is one of the easiest and most rewarding practices you will implement. If you are already doing it, ask about ways to improve the timing and using the data to tighten up your calving season.