Smooth Transitions

Carl Dahlen, North Dakota State University

Spring is a time of transition in the beef industry; grasses breaking dormancy, cattle being turned out to pasture, and a herd that is moving from calving this year's calf crop to conceiving that of next year. Things are changing at a rapid pace but it is important to pay attention to a few details.

"Traditional" turnout dates have not been consistent the past two years. While the dry spring of 2012 found many cattle on pastures earlier than average, spring of 2013 turnout will be much later than average in the upper Midwest. Thus, it is imperative producers pay attention to the transition of forages rather than the calendar. Initial grazing time and pressure sets the stage for the entire growing season and significant losses in productivity are likely to occur if forages are grazed too early. It is best to wait for turnout until grasses are at least at the 2½-3 leaf stage and not to overgraze once cattle have been turned out. Waiting until the appropriate physiological age of the forages supports a greater pasture carrying capacity and increases the performance of a set number of grazing animals.

For many operations, the transition into breeding is shortly after the transition to grazing. As cattle prepare for breeding, previous management should be taken into account to optimize reproductive success. Starting with the vitamin and mineral balance of a herd is vital. Vitamin and mineral supplementation should be offered as cattle transition to grass and continue at a minimum through pregnancy establishment and early fetal growth. Since vitamin and mineral content of forages is based on local soil and water nutrients, supplements should also be formulated to account for local conditions. Soil, plant, and water testing will provide appropriate metrics for local vitamin and mineral formulation.

Lingering effects of the 2012 drought may still be present in water supplies. Wells, ponds, and flowing water sources can be affected by dry conditions with an increase in salinity and total dissolved solids often the result. If an area lacked moisture through the winter of 2012-2013, pasture water sources may be dangerous to cattle at the time of turnout. Water is the most important nutrient and is involved in almost all bodily functions. Without water, cattle would not survive and water of poor quality can lead to diarrhea, dehydration, neurological disease, and death. A water test prior to turnout will give a good indication of water quality during the transition from consuming stored feeds to grazing.

Dramatic changes in diet around the time of breeding can also lead to poor reproductive performance. Cattle maintained on stored feeds and turned to pasture immediately after breeding with artificial insemination will have poorer reproductive performance compared with those acclimated to pasture before breeding. To combat performance reduction, a supplement (e.g., distillers grains) that cattle were consuming prior to breeding can be delivered to the pasture. Supplementing at the time of turnout will help maintain body weight and reproductive performance during the transition phase.

An additional consideration when breeding just prior to turnout is the time from breeding to moving. Stress of movement, either by trailer hauling or walking long distances to summer pastures can cause pregnancy losses of 10-12%. If cattle must be hauled, it is best to do so within four days of breeding or wait until 45 days after. When working cattle, do so in a calm, low-stress manner for best results.

The final, and often forgotten, detail during this transitional period is management of the herd bulls. Vaccinations and breeding soundness examination prior to turnout are just the beginning. Bulls should be well adapted to grazing and have plenty of exercise prior to being introduced to cows for breeding. This is especially important for yearling bulls developed on high concentrate rations. In addition, all bulls should be monitored closely for breeding activity and injuries throughout the breeding season. If problems are identified early, it is likely the breeding season can be salvaged by early intervention. The cost of realizing bulls had breeding trouble at a later time, however, is something no producer wants to incur.

Currently many components of the beef production system are in a state of transition. While things such as temperature and moisture are beyond our control, certain steps can be taken to ensure smooth transitions for the forages and grazing cattle. The result of taking action now will be greater forage yields and greater production in beef herds grazing those forages.