

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Veterinary Roles in Herd Profitability

How management and veterinarian practices can play a role in increasing profits.

Cattle ranching is rewarding but challenging economically. Veterinarians provide three types of services that help ranchers meet their economic goals: increase herd income by enhancing reproductive and growth efficiency as well as offering options for marketing high-health cattle; help control costs through nutritional and input cost counseling, and protect the herd from losses due to disease and injury.

The income side of ranching is driven by reproductive efficiency and market value of cattle sold. Reproductive efficiency is often measured by calculating the value of calves sold divided by the number of cows exposed for breeding. To achieve most herds' economic goals, a high percentage of cows exposed to bulls need to become pregnant and to maintain that pregnancy.

Veterinarians can provide advice and services to monitor and evaluate cattle so a high percentage of the herd is able to successfully mate at the start of each breeding season.

The cost side of the ranching business ledger is controlled by optimizing forage utilization, supplementation plans and input purchases. While other expertise is often necessary to optimize grazing management, veterinarians can utilize data collected throughout the year

to evaluate the appropriateness of the herd's stocking density and cow maintenance requirements.

Veterinary data that provides valuable information includes body condition scores (BCS), percentage of cows exposed to bulls that are pregnant and the amount of supplemental feed needed to maintain current BCS. In most areas of the United States, forage is dormant for at least a portion of the year and is not likely to provide all the nutrients needed to attain adequate reproductive efficiency. Therefore, grazing must be supplemented using cost-effective strategies.

Monitoring forage production and cow body condition throughout the year prevents cows from becoming so thin that they require substantial supplemental feed to regain lost body weight. When additional protein or energy is needed to supplement available forage, veterinarians can help identify inexpensive plans that consider both feedstuff and cost.

Besides grazing and supplemental feed expense advice, veterinarians can also provide valuable information about the need for and the amount and type of mineral supplements, dewormers, fly control products and other animal health supplies to ensure these products and services return more than they cost.

The final area of veterinary advice and services that affect a rancher's bottom line is the need to provide reasonable protection against health risks. Calhoo diseases such as blackleg, scours and summer pneumonia can result in high treatment costs, death loss and reduced growth. These risks are controlled through a combination of sanitation, biosecurity, vaccination and effective treatments. Abortion-causing diseases and diseases or injuries that affect bull health and the bulls' breeding ability can be devastating to reproductive efficiency. Veterinarians can help to optimize vaccines, testing and quarantine of herd additions and management strategies to limit breeding herd exposure to infectious disease, toxins, parasites and physical dangers.

Your veterinarian can be a valuable asset to help attain high reproductive efficiency; manage grazing to optimize forage utilization; use supplemental protein and energy strategically; and reduce the risk of common and devastating losses due to infectious disease, toxins, parasites and injuries. **AJ**

Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.