

In our previous article we discussed some advantages of pregnancy detection in the fall and how it can be used to help make managerial decisions regarding your cattle. This week we want to present three different methods of pregnancy detection that are available to cattle producers. As we discuss each method and its advantages and disadvantages, we urge you to think about your goals for your operation. Ask yourself “Which of these methods most appropriately fits my operational needs and goals?”

Perhaps the most popular method of pregnancy detection is that of rectal palpation. Rectal palpation is performed by palpating the reproductive tract of the cow through the rectal wall. It can be done as early as 35 days post-breeding, or any time after. It is important to note that there may be a risk of aborted pregnancies (especially in the first 60 days) with rectal palpation, as it is more invasive and involves more handling of the reproductive tract compared to the other methods. And, because the fetus is only felt, not seen, it is difficult and often impossible to determine fetus gender and viability, and proves difficult to detect any issues that may be present within the reproductive tract of the female (such as infection, aborted pregnancy, and mummified fetus). One of the most advantageous things about rectal palpation is that results are known immediately, which allows the producer to make a chute side decision regarding the management/culling plans for that female. Rectal palpation is also advantageous, as it requires little equipment, and provides producers with an age of the fetus.

Transrectal ultrasonography, better known as ultrasound is another method that is available to producers. This is performed by passing the transducer into the rectum of the cow, then placing it over the reproductive tract to visualize the uterus. It can be done as early as 28 days post-breeding, but typically is not conducive for advanced stages of pregnancy. Ultrasound may be slightly more time consuming than rectal palpation, but because the tract can be visualized, more information is made available. Viability of fetus can be determined, along with age and gender (see our Fetal Sexing article posted September 25, 2015). Like palpation, ultrasound provides the producer with immediate results, which aide in making managerial decisions. And, unlike rectal palpation, sonogram is less invasive, causing less trauma to the fetus.

The third method of pregnancy detection is the blood test. It can be done when the females are at least 28 days post-breeding, and the test only requires a blood sample. The blood is tested to detect the presence of a specific protein that is only present by placenta surrounding a developing fetus. Some false positives may occur due to the fact that the cow will still show pregnant if an early (within the first 60 days) embryonic death has occurred. It should also be noted that most fetal deaths occur during the first 60 days of gestation. Further, since only blood is drawn, the fetus is neither felt nor visualized, which eliminates any determination of fetus viability, age, and/or sex. And, results are not immediate, as the producer must submit the samples to a lab, and then wait a few days for the results. Pulling blood to have tested for pregnancy diagnosis can be quickly done by a producer, and does not require any special equipment or training. This method seems ideal to producers who simply need to know which females are bred or open, and don't need to know the age of the fetus.

As you can see, varied options are available for determining if your cattle are pregnant. Decide what your goals are, and which of these methods best fit the needs of your operation. If you have any questions about these methods of pregnancy detection, please contact us.

Thanks,
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