

Investigating Abortions In Cattle

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Dairy producers invest considerable time and effort into the reproduction programs for their cattle. Getting cows bred in a timely fashion is very important in maintaining a profitable herd.

One of the greatest frustrations that dairy producers face is the abortion of a good cow with a late term calf. Abortions can be due to genetic, environmental, or infectious causes.

Genetic losses can be due to heredity, errors in fertilization, or mutations. Typically these occur very early in gestation (normally less than 30 days). These types of losses can in many ways be considered normal and are the reason that even an ideal first service conception rate of 60 percent is about as good as it gets. Animals or closely related animals that repeatedly have problems with early embryonic loss might have an inherited problem that could be diagnosed. However, for most cases of early embryonic loss due to genetic or development mistakes, diagnosis is impossible.

Environmental causes for fetal loss can be explored and vary according to the toxic agent, level of exposure, age of fetus, and seasonal effects. Fetal

losses due in these situations can be difficult to diagnose but can be explored with excellent records and adequate sampling.

Abortions due to infectious causes are the types of abortion with the best chance of diagnosis. In fact of all cattle abortions that end with a definitive laboratory diagnosis, 90 percent are due to infectious agents. That certainly does not mean that all or most cases of abortions are diagnosed. In fact data from labs around the country indicate that of all cattle abortions submitted, only 30 to 40 percent ever end with a definitive cause for the abortion. This low success rate frustrates dairy producers and veterinarians alike. So what should dairy producers do? Just ignore lost calves and hope the problem goes away? Buy every vaccine they can afford? Spend a fortune for every diagnostic test the veterinarian or lab can think of? None of these suggestions are very attractive options. A late term abortion is estimated to cost \$600. When abortion problems occur in excess, it is not only frustrating to producers, it is also a very large economic loss.

Knowing that some abortions will occur each year, how does a producer know when a new prob-

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