

NAVAN VETERINARY SERVICES – JUNE 2013 NEWSLETTER

A couple of articles in recent issues of producer magazines caught my attention. Both dealt with age at 1st calving for dairy heifers. We have been told that heifers should calve at 24 months. I believe, if memory serves me correctly, that an article written in the 1960's promoted this concept. So it is certainly nothing new.

The 1st article I read is in this year's 2012 Progress Report from Canwest DHI (page 4). A chart shows that the group of heifers calving between 25 and 26 months had the most animals – 22.4%. Meanwhile the group calving at 24 to 25 months had about the same number as the group at 29 months and older – 15%. This tells me that even though progress has been made there are still lots of room for improvement.

The next article was in Hoard's Dairyman, April 25, 2013 – page 305. In this article it states that heifers calving at 24 months in Pennsylvania in 2011 included the most animals and that there were more calving at 23 months than 25 months. The big take home message in this article though, dealt with milk production. A graph demonstrated that the most milk per lactation was seen in heifers that calved between 21 and 23 months of age. I believe that the biggest reason I hear to substantiate older heifers at calving is more milk. Maybe we can move away from this theory.

Your heifers are the most fertile and should have the best genetics of any animal on the farm. This is a great reason to breed early. We know that in order to calve at 24 months and younger these heifers need to be of adequate stature and bodyweight at breeding. In order to have stature and weight at breeding we can't suddenly start paying attention to them at 15 months of age. The Canwest article uses the term "focused effort" – an excellent phrase. Effort is required to achieve a good heifer breeding program, and it starts at birth.

Heifer goals, quite simply, are to reach desired body weight and stature early to stimulate reproductive activity. This is followed by pregnancy and an easy calving leading into 1st lactation. Milk fed calves should grow at a rate of 0.7 – 0.8 kg per day. Calves should double their birth weight when weaned at 56 days. This means that your average 42 kg heifer calf will weigh 85 kg at weaning. Measure your calves – see how you fare. Calves growing at this rate will produce more milk than their herd mates that grow more slowly. Also, calves that grow below 0.5 kg per day have an increased risk of disease as their immune systems suffer due to an energy shortage. Dairy heifer growth curves are accelerating through to 6 months of age. Better growth can be achieved by feeding this group a high protein dry TMR – chopped hay and grain.

Breeding can start when heifers weigh between 340-380 kg and are 53" tall at the hip. See where 53" is on your body and mark posts in your pens at this height. This will help make it much easier to determine which heifers are ready to breed. Remember that small heifers usually stay small so delayed breeding is not usually worthwhile. Decide to cull early and cut your losses.

When grouping heifers prior to breeding, try to make changes at least 2 weeks before you intend to breed. Socialization and acclimatization to new groups results in poorer reproductive success when recently co-mingled heifers are bred.

Finally, reducing the age at 1st calving has a significant effect on the number of heifers required to maintain herd size. For example, the number of heifers in inventory required per year to maintain a herd of 100 cows when calving at 24 months versus 26 months with a culling rate of 30% is an extra 6 at 26 months. At today's feed costs, maintaining 6 extra heifers adds up. Compare this maintenance cost versus the heifer that is already in milk production and destined to give more milk in her 305 day lactation.

Calve them earlier. It seems to make sense/cents!