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Several possible reasons for fertility problems this fall

As the breeding season winds down this year, many cow-calf farmers have already pregnancy-tested their cows, or they'll be doing so soon. There have been several potential problems this year that may reduce fertility in your cow herds.

Ergot toxicity

There was a substantial amount of ergot-infected cool season grasses this summer. Ergot is a fungus that can grow in the seed head of grasses and small grains under certain environmental conditions. The fungus produces a toxin that can have detrimental effects on cattle including decreased fertility.

Ergot-infected grasses can be confirmed by identifying the black ergot body in the seed head. Grasses with increased ergot infection should be tested for the ergovaline toxin.

EHD/Bluetongue

There was a severe outbreak of Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease in deer last year. Although EHD has not been a severe problem this year in deer, the virus can still be circulating and potentially could cause some fertility issues.

Fetuses infected between 70 and 120 days of gestation will often die and infections later on may cause congenital defects. Similar conditions can also be seen with the closely related viral disease Bluetongue.

Vitamin A deficiency

Although not normally a concern for cattle grazing green grass, Vitamin A deficiency may have some fertility impacts this year. Extensive Vitamin A deficiency this past winter portends that many cattle began the breeding season with low Vitamin A levels. Since adequate Vitamin A is necessary for efficient conversion of carotene to Vitamin A, cows may have had difficulty restoring liver stores of Vitamin A. Low Vitamin A has been associated with reduced conception rates in cows and may reduce fertility in bulls, also.

Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis continues to be identified in cowherds in Iowa. This sexually transmitted disease has only recently been diagnosed in Iowa. Bulls are asymptomatic carriers of the protozoa and infect the cow during breeding.

Cows will typically lose their fetus approximately 50 days after conceiving and then can clear the infection and develop immunity in 20-40 days. Therefore, with a long breeding season these cows may get pregnant, but will be late bred.

The Iowa Cattlemen's Association has a task force that is currently considering state protocols for testing bulls for trichomoniasis.

Consider pregnancy test

Cow-calf producers should pregnancy-test their cows this year, particularly since potential causes of fertility problems are increased and feed costs will make it costly to feed open cows through the winter.

Operations with decreased fertility should try and determine what the inciting cause was. Ergot-infected grass harvested as hay can still have health impacts this winter if used for feed. Vitamin A deficiency can continue to cause health problems, especially causing weak calves in the spring. Trichomoniasis will continue to be a problem as bulls remain carriers and will continue to infect cows as immunity in cows does not carry over year to year.