Western Beef Resource Committee *Third Edition*

Cattle Producer's Handbook

Animal Health Section 661

Diseases of Beef Cattle Associated with Post-calving and Breeding

S. P. Cuneo, D.V.M., Department of Animal Sciences
C. S. Card, D.V.M., Ph.D., Department of Veterinary Sciences
E. J. Bicknell, D.V.M., Ph.D., Department of Veterinary Sciences
The University of Arizona

Once a cow has delivered her calf, the groundwork for the next year's calf crop must be laid. This publication will examine some of the more common problems that occur during the post-calving interval and at the time of breeding. Often these problems are subtle, and a producer may not realize there is a problem until the cows are examined for pregnancy or until the next calving season. Once a problem has progressed to this point, the individual animal is often culled from the herd or an entire calf crop can be significantly reduced.

Problems Post-calving

Metritis (Uterine Infection)

Cows will normally have a discharge from their birth canal for 8 to 14 days post-calving. This discharge is often thick and reddish in color and has no odor. If the uterus has become infected from calving, the cow has developed a metritis.

Causes—Infection of the uterus by bacteria after calving. Often cows that have had a difficult birth, a retained placenta, or have calved in a dirty environment will become infected.

Clinical Signs—They include discharge from the birth canal that is thin, watery, red to gray in color, and has a foul smell. Other symptoms may include sickness, increased temperature, depression, off feed, diarrhea, and stop milking.

Treatment—Administer drugs to evacuate the uterus of infected contents. Usually oxytocin will only work in the first 48 hours after calving. Prostaglandins may be more effective in increasing uterine tone and opening the cervix to drain the uterus.

Antibiotics should be infused into the uterus. Systemic antibiotics are useful, especially oxytetracycline.

If the cow is sick, supportive treatment is necessary; fluids, steroids, glucose, and antihistamines. Cattle may develop tetanus or other clostridial infections from a metritis, so vaccination or use of tetanus anti-toxin may be indicated.

After Effects—These may include chronic uterine infection and a problem breeder.

Endometritis

This is chronic low-grade infection of the uterus. The cow very seldom shows any outward signs.

Causes—This condition often follows metritis or retained placenta, and often follows difficult calving, twins, abortions, or C-sections. Physical damage to the birth canal during calving or during breeding can also be a cause.

Clinical Signs—No signs are evident other than some flecks of pus in the mucus discharged during the heat periods. Affected cattle will cycle normally but will not conceive. Uterus may feel abnormal during rectal palpation.

Treatment—Evacuate the uterus using prostaglandins. Treat uterus with antibiotic flushes. It is best to treat the uterus during a heat to improve drainage. Often no treatment is done because the problem is not discovered until pregnancy examination, and the cow is culled for being open.

Prevention—Identify all cows with calving problems and watch for abnormal discharges. Consider having a pre-breeding examination done on cattle with potential problems so they can be treated before breeding starts or identified to be culled.