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The Relationship Between Nutrition and Breeding

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It is important to most ranchers to have a cow that has a calf every year. In order to accomplish this, a cow must be bred back within 85 days of calving. Maintaining this tight calving schedule is essential to maximizing profitability in a cow-calf operation. Cattle that don't calve each year are not conducive to a successful business. Having a defined calving season increases economic success and the production of a cow-calf herd. It is difficult to use production management practices on your herd when calves are not born during the same time period. This results in calves that are not ready for vaccines, branding, castrating, or sale at the same time. For example, calves that are two weeks' old do not need the same vaccines as those that are six months old. Similarly, a dry cow does not need the same nutrition as a cow with a calf at her side. If calves are not ready for these management practices at the same time, it increases the labor necessary to take care of the herd. Improving uniformity of your calves (ages, size, weight, color, etc.), allows for easier marketing when they are weaned. Buyers are usually looking for calves that are uniform. They will often pay more for a large group of calves that are similar in size, weight, and color than calves that are varied.

Nutrition plays a highly important role in ensuring that the cow's reproduction processes are working at maximum efficiency. Whether a cow has poor or proper nutrition will cause a ripple effect for her breeding ability. In the case of poor nutrition, a cow will not have a healthy calf and will take longer to breed back, if she is able to become pregnant at all. Unhealthy cows will not produce high-quality colostrum, robbing her calf of vital nutrients and affecting its long-term health.

One of the easiest ways to measure how successful your nutrition program is, is to monitor the body condition scores of your stock. Body condition scores (BCS) run from 1-9, with one being extremely poor (starving) condition and 9 being severely obese. Cows should be maintained at a BCS of 6 to have increased conception rates and healthy calves. Cows with a BCS of 4 only have conception rates of 43% as opposed to 90% or more when they have a BCS of 6. Cattle that are severely overweight are also less likely to rebreed well. A cow's BCS can be monitored by observing or feeling different parts of their body. The main areas to focus on are the cow's brisket, ribs, back, hip bone, tailhead, and pin bone. Scores are assigned based on how much fat is on these areas. Learning to visually assign a BCS takes a lot of practice. The ability to put your hands on a cow can be helpful, especially when a cow has a lot of hair.

Keeping cows at an ideal body weight will increase profitability of your operation. Proper nutrition is vital to ensuring that this happens. Your cows and nutrition programs should be evaluated regularly to ensure that they are effective. If your nutrition program is not producing the results that you desire, be willing to seek assistance and make changes.