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Are You Sure That Your Cattle Are Pregnant?

Have you ever had a surprise at calving time when a lot fewer calves pop out than you expected? You don't have to wait until calving time to find out if your bull has been doing his job. Testing whether your cows are pregnant makes sense as it allows you to make important husbandry and management decisions with full information about the pregnancy status of your herd.

Knowing the pregnancy status of your herd helps with decisions such as whether to sell non-pregnant cows (rather than feed them for another season with no return), or to put the non-pregnant cows back in with the bull, or to buy more cows or steers (as there will be less calves on the ground).

Veterinarians can provide accurate pregnancy diagnosis in cattle using manual palpation. This method of diagnosis allows ageing of the foetus and can be used from 6 weeks until the cow is at full term. The precision of foetal ageing depends on the skill and experience of the operator, whatever method is used.

The use of ultrasound is increasing in livestock industries with sheep scanners expanding their services into scanning cattle too. B-mode ultrasonography with a rectal probe is best suited to cattle pregnancy diagnosis. Doppler ultrasound has been promoted to the farming community as an alternative to manual pregnancy testing however its accuracy is questionable. Due to their size, it is much more difficult to accurately scan cattle from the side of their abdomen – putting the probe into the rectum offers the most accurate ultrasound diagnosis. For cattle, due to the length of gestation and value of the calf, it is vital to get an accurate diagnosis.

It is also necessary to have manual palpation skills as an adjunct to ultrasound – any cow that is determined to be not pregnant on ultrasound **MUST** be manually palpated to be conclusively diagnosed as not pregnant. Ultrasound is limited to pregnancies less than 120 days gestation due to the deep-lying anatomy of the pregnant uterus at this stage of gestation.

Why use a vet?

In addition to providing accurate pregnancy diagnosis, veterinarians can help to identify any fertility problems caused by disease, nutritional deficiencies or bull problems. We can also provide professional management advice. A vet will not only provide pregnancy diagnosis but a whole 'heard health' visit, which is an opportunity to discuss reproductive or other concerns you have regarding your stock.

Owners may also wish to use a tail tag system to identify pregnant or empty cattle with official tags upon diagnosis. Programs such as the Australian Cattle Vets National Cattle Pregnancy Diagnosis Scheme (which provide the tags) allow an increased market value of pregnant breeding females or empty feedlot heifers. This is a service that only accredited veterinarians can provide.

Once a veterinarian is employed in a herd health visit, a partnership is established between vet and client. We are then able to legally dispense antibiotics or other medications that may be required as we have a working knowledge of your property and stock.

If you have any questions or concerns, our friendly staff will be happy to provide you with help and advice regarding the health and welfare of your animals.

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The team at Cowra Veterinary Centre

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