

# OFF THE HOOF

*Kentucky Beef Newsletter – September 2009*

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*Published Monthly by Dr. Les Anderson, Beef Extension Specialist, Department of Animal & Food Science, University of Kentucky*

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## Don't Forget!

*Dr. Les Anderson, Extension Beef Specialist, University of Kentucky*

September 29	Master Cattleman Field Day, Princeton, 9 am	
October 27	Kentucky Beef Conference, Fayette County Extension Office	9 am
October 29	10 <sup>th</sup> Kentucky Grazing Conference, Princeton	

## Timely Tips

*Dr. Roy Burris, University of Kentucky Beef Specialist*

## Spring-Calving Cows

- This has been an exceptional grazing year – no need to “early wean”. Keep up rotational grazing to preserve grazing into the winter.
- Limited creep feeding can prepare calves for the weaning process since they can become accustomed to eating dry feed. This will especially benefit those calves which you are going to keep for a short postweaning period – like the CPH-45 program. It's time to start planning the marketing of this year's calf crop.
- When planning the preweaning working, consult with your veterinarian for advice on animal health products and procedures. Some procedures which can be done now are pregnancy checking cows (which will allow time to make culling decisions prior to weaning time), and blood testing cows for herd certification. The remainder of the work, like booster shots, can be done at weaning time.
- It is time to start the process of weaning spring-born calves. Stresses associated with weaning can be minimized by spreading-out other activities commonly associated with weaning – like vaccinations,

deworming and, perhaps, castration and dehorning (which should have already been done!). Therefore, this month is a good time to do a “preweaning” working of cows and calves.

- Begin evaluating individuals for herd replacements – or culling. Each time you put them through the chute you can evaluate them for several traits, including their disposition.

### **Fall-Calving Cows**

- Fall-calving should start this month. Get your eartags ready. Cows should be moved to a clean, accessible pasture and be watched closely. Tag calves soon after they are born and record dam ID and calf birthdate, etc. Castration is less stressful when performed on young animals and calves which are intended for feeders can be implanted now, too.
- Move cows to best quality fall pasture after calving. Stockpiled fescue should be available to these cows in November-December to meet their nutritional needs for milking and rebreeding.
- Start planning now for the breeding season. If using AI, order supplies, plan matings and order semen now.

### **Stockers**

- Calves to be backgrounded through the winter can be purchased soon. A good source is Kentucky preconditioned (CPH-45) calves which are immunized and have been preweaned and “boosted”.
- Plan your receiving program. Weanling calves undergo a great deal of stress associated with weaning, hauling, marketing, and wide fluctuations in environmental temperature at this time of year. Plan a program which avoids stale cattle, get calves consuming water and high quality feed rapidly. Guard against respiratory diseases and other health problems.

### **General**

- Complete nitrogen application to fescue pastures which are needed for stockpiling early this month and allow them to grow and accumulate until November, or when other sources of grazing have been used up - so that grazing may be extended and feeding can be delayed. To make best use of this pasture, put fall calvers or thin spring-calvers on this pasture and strip graze.
- Plan the winter feeding program. Take forage samples of hay which you will feed this winter. Request protein and TDN analysis so that supplemental feed needs may be estimated. Plan to minimize hay storage and feeding loss, consider utilizing crop residue for dry cows, group cattle according to their feed needs.
- Don't graze sorghum or sudan pastures between the first frost and a definite killing frost because of the danger of prussic acid poisoning. Johnsongrass in stalk fields can also be a problem after a light frost. Grazing can resume after the sorghum-type grasses have undergone a killing frost and dried up.
- We are planning for Beef Bash '10 for next year. We alternate with the All Commodity Field Day which was held this year. We have not forgotten about it. It will be next September.

## **Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

*Dr. Roy Burris, Beef Extension Specialist, University of Kentucky*

I spent one summer during my college years working as a student trainee for a lending institution. One day I went with my supervisor to collect on a delinquent loan. On that day I gained some insight into what makes farmers, cattlemen and landowners “tick”.

We were sitting on the front porch of this elderly gentlemen’s quaint home surrounded by hills and trees. The seriousness of the loan status was discussed and it was suggested that maybe he could sell some timber to meet his financial obligations. I will never forget his response. He said “I have lived on bean soup many a day to keep from cutting those trees!”

I didn’t understand why he would risk the entire farm to protect a part of it. An economist or banker probably wouldn’t agree with that logic either, but I have come to understand it. There’s something about the land that sometimes keeps us from making purely logical business decisions.

I remember when we had some timber cut on the home farm in the 1960’s. It was a fairly simple process with mules used to pull the logs – easy on the environment. I had the same land cut over in the 1990’s with skidders and loaders and the aftermath looked like a war zone. I knew then what the landowner had feared. Although, there might have been a compromise that would have allowed him to have done what was environmentally acceptable and still meet his economic needs.

Farmers and cattlemen frequently find themselves in situations which can be a struggle between what’s best for the environment and what’s best for their family. Most care deeply about both. That is why some decisions about farm management can be so tough. It’s what some folks call being between the proverbial “rock and a hard place”.

Critics of American agriculture don’t have a clue about how people who live off the land struggle to hold on to a way of life that is usually intertwined over generations and not always economically rewarding. Our problem is that we normally have to consider the bottom line because all bills must eventually be paid. Urbanites who cruise down the parkway in their luxury SUVs should be careful about judging us or making regulations about things they don’t understand.

Cattle producers are constantly making difficult decisions. Which cows do you keep? Which cows do you cull? Culling old barren cows seems like a “no-brainer” but we struggle with even that decision. Why? Because we are the people that really care about animals. Sometimes we care too much, but I don’t believe that we should be lectured to, or regulated by, people who can’t possibly understand our way of life.

Selling land or farms is even more difficult than selling cows. Whether you decide to keep your land, preserve it as a legacy or trust, or sell it outright is your business. Everyone should respect that. It can be a heart-wrenching decision but logic and the bottom line may factor into the decision.

What happens when land that has an agricultural value of \$2,500 per acre suddenly has a value of \$25,000 per acre for development? An unbiased economist will tell you that is an easy decision. Sell it. Yet we agonize over the decision. What would great-grandfather think? What will our neighbors think? What is the right thing to do? We’re between a “rock and a hard place” again.

The logical decision is to take the money and re-invest in less expensive farmland and/or secure your family's financial future. If it is a matter of choosing between family and land, make the logical choice and move on. If you can afford to "tie up" the land for subsequent generations or preserve some "green space" from urban encroachment, that is a great and noble action.

In the end, only you and your family can decide what is best for your long-term well-being, and what reflects your own values. We are always concerned about being good stewards of the land and living our values. Just be true to those values but don't let others influence you unduly. Remember "those that matter don't mind and those that mind don't matter".

## **The Price of Food**

*Dr. Chad Lee, Crop Specialist, University of Kentucky*

Is a highly efficient agriculture and cheap food necessarily a bad thing? A recent article by Brian Walsh for Time Magazine ([Getting Real about the High price of Food, Aug. 21, 2009](#)) suggests that it is and that our cheap food is an illusion and is really costing much, much more. This is the latest in a series of articles, books and films questioning modern agriculture and its methods.

Mr. Walsh ties pork production to pigs grown in extreme confinement, doped on antibiotics and fed with cheap corn grown with "millions of tons of chemical fertilizer." The events of pork production are grossly distorted. To describe pork production that way is akin to suggesting that mountains of forests were clear-cut, tons of timber were milled and barrels of poisonous ink were used to print the very magazine in which the article appears.

Both statements above have a shade of the truth, but the truth is heavily draped in exaggeration and fear. The argument strikes at emotions, first, by telling people that they should be afraid of their food and then speckles in a few facts, distorted as they are, as an attempt to appeal to logic. The double-pronged approach is extremely effective.

The very tone of the article is indicative of people who worry very little about having enough to eat, a luxury not shared by many people around the world. In some ways, U.S. farmers and agriculture are victims of their own successes. In the United States, we now have the smallest percentage of the population producing the largest supply of food ever. By having a very small proportion of the people producing food, a very large proportion are free to pursue other interests, develop new technologies, advance new policies and to even become journalists.

As people move away from the farm and lose their connection with their distant ancestors, they tend to romanticize agriculture. Farming is often depicted as a "simpler lifestyle" as many urban dwellers remember summer visits to grandparents or cousins in the country. Memories of the old family farm mingle with songs like "Old McDonald's Farm", and television shows like "Little House on the Prairie" where all the animals live peacefully together in a single barn and the family spends more time singing or playing than actually working.

The reality is that agriculture always has been challenging. If it were not so, more people would live and work on the farm. Agriculture is inherently risky. It requires huge investments up front with only the potential for profits several months to years away. A drought or a flood or an outbreak of disease or insects can destroy crops and months of hard labor and investment. The goal of farmers, ranchers and researchers is to improve efficiency, quality and consistency of the food supply and the facts demonstrate our shared

success. The result is a food supply that is the cheaper, safer and more abundant than ever . . . and unfortunately an urban population completely disconnected from the realities and challenges of agriculture.

This disconnection is clearly on display with what Mr. Walsh deems an acceptable farm. Mr. Walsh decries the modern large farms as being “factory farms” because they sell large quantities of cattle or crops. His alternative is Niman Ranch, which markets large amounts of “all-natural” beef, pork and poultry from many farms, has its own CEO and was founded by a former attorney for Earthjustice. So, Mr. Walsh complains about a modern feedlot operation who buys cattle from many smaller farmers across the country, finishes those cattle, and then sells those cattle at a price that is affordable by most households in the U.S. However, Mr. Walsh favors a farm corporation with a CEO who markets and sells cattle for many farms at a price that only the wealthy can afford. Bashing the large family farm in favor of another large corporation with projected 2008 revenues of \$75million (according to Wikipedia) seems highly illogical.

Mr. Walsh says that the recent recalls and outbreaks are examples of a dangerous food supply that is getting more dangerous. The recalls are examples that the regulatory agencies are doing their jobs. Food contamination is as old as agriculture, itself . . . actually, it probably predates agriculture when people first killed animals and didn’t fully cook the meat, or when they used unsanitary methods to handle and consume fruits and vegetables. Mr. Walsh would likely suggest that we didn’t have recalls 100 years ago. He’s right. No one was checking; people just got sick and died!

Mr. Walsh says that farmers are eroding soils with modern agriculture. Erosion has and still does occur in the United States. In fact, erosion has always been a challenge in agriculture. The U.S. farmer in conjunction with researchers at Land Grant universities and the USDA Agricultural Research Service have worked very diligently over the last 100 years to develop production techniques that greatly reduced erosion. By comparison, the largest loss of soil from erosion from farming occurred in ancient Africa with primitive farming techniques. Mr. Walsh praises today’s ‘organic farmer’ as being sustainable. The irony is that organic farming uses practices very similar to those used by ancient Africans as they destroyed their soil resources.

The disconnect between those who consume food and those who produce it likely will widen as agriculture continues to improve production practices. Many modern farms are large farms, and many large farms are family farms. These family farms are intent on producing food safely, efficiently and sustainably. They think long term and are planning to pass on the farm and its natural resources to the next generation. The American consumer should thank the American farmer for producing such a safe, abundant and relatively inexpensive food supply...and for not having to produce it themselves.

The disconnect between people consuming food and the efforts of producing it are fertile ground for seeds of fear and distrust. Those of us who work in Cooperative Extension at Land Grant Universities constantly field questions from well-intentioned citizens who are genuinely concerned about their food. They are not exactly sure where and how their food is produced. Those who adamantly despise modern agriculture, or perhaps the consumption of animal proteins, are prolific at writing and communicating. They are very effective at delivering their message. Those engaged in producing food are much better at ...well, at producing food. In general, we are great at talking shop with our counterparts, but we are terrible about explaining to our neighbors what we do. Those of us remaining in agriculture must defend the successes of modern farming.

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Chad Lee were expressed above and are not necessarily those of the University of Kentucky or the Cooperative Extension Service.

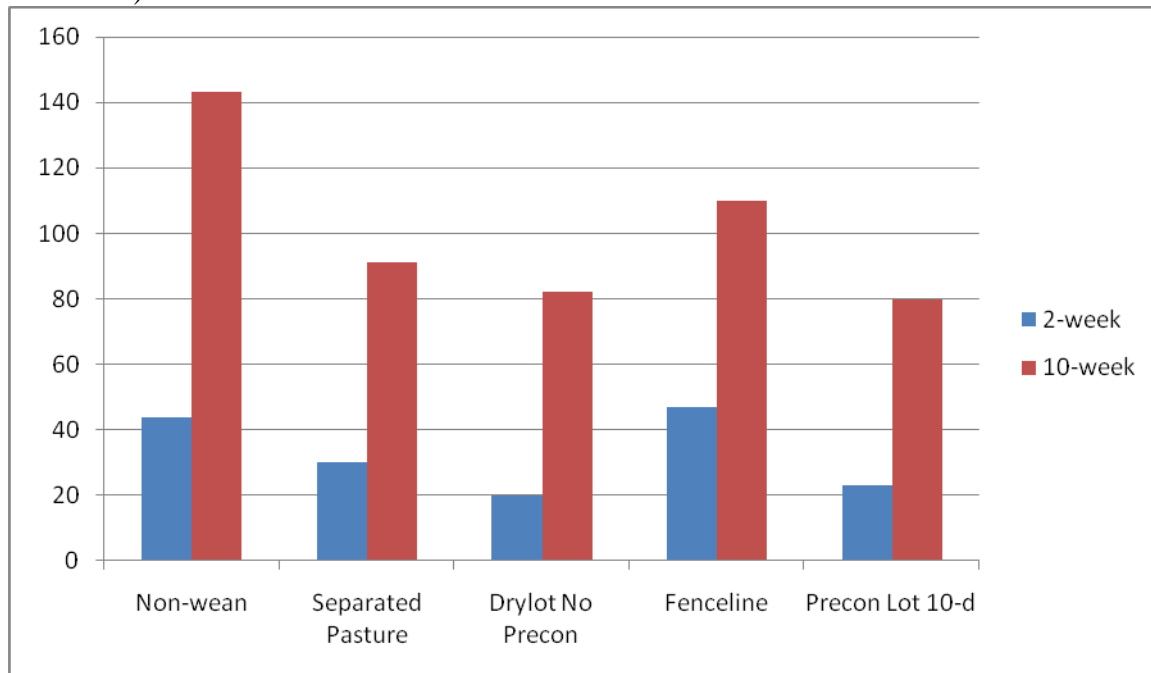
## Stock Pile Grass, not Just for Cows

*Dr. Jeff Lehmkuhler, Beef Extension Specialist, University of Kentucky*

This is the time of year in which nitrogen fertilization that was applied a couple weeks combined with adequate moisture provides beef cattle producers an opportunity to reduce their cow feed costs. The fall has so far has been near idealistic for stockpiling tall fescue for late fall/early winter grazing. Though this is perhaps often considered with respect to the cow herd, don't overlook it is a way of reducing expenses for preconditioning calves.

Fenceline weaning received a great deal of publicity following an article published by California researchers Price and colleagues in 2003. Their work summarized in Figure 1 documented that when calves were fenceline weaned, two week cumulative weight gains were similar to the calves that were not weaned and remained on the cows while having higher gains than those calves either weaned on pasture, weaned in a drylot or weaned following a 10-d preconditioning period to alfalfa hay. This weight advantage persisted until 10 weeks post-weaning. What I found particularly interesting was the gain advantage calves that were separated and maintained on pasture had over those that were placed in the drylot.

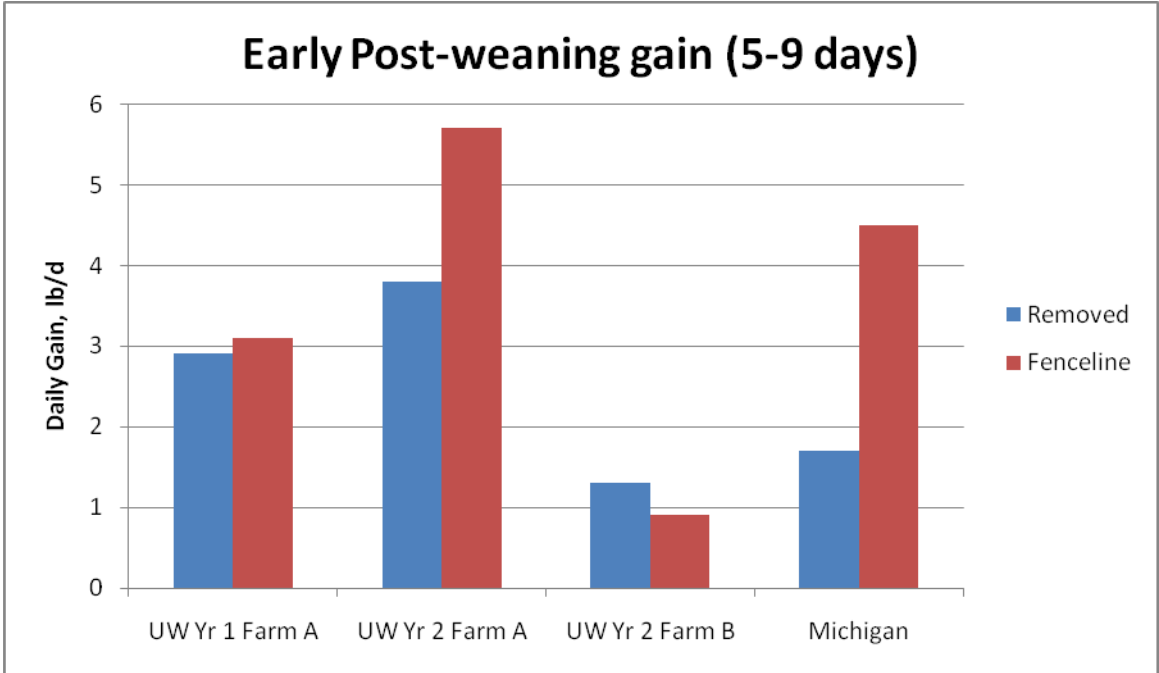
Figure 1. Post-weaning cumulative 2- and 10-week gains for various weaning managements (Price et al., 2003 JAS).



In 2003, while at Wisconsin, we conducted a weaning demonstration with half our research herd beef calves weaned on pasture with supplement using fenceline techniques and the rest of the calves placed in a small grass lot with hay and supplement removed from the sight of the cows a few hundred meters away. In this demonstration it was observed that calves remaining on grass with some supplementation gained near 3.0 lbs/d the first 9-days post-weaning. Too good to be true!?! There was really not a strong

advantage observed for fenceline over calves that were some distance from the cows on pasture. However, Buskirk and co-workers at Michigan State University observed daily gains of 4.5 lb/d the first 5 days post-weaning for fenceline weaned calves versus 1.7 lb for calves that were more weaned and moved to remote pastures. By the end of a 42-day backgrounding period the total weight gain was similar for the weaning management system and this was similar to what we observed in our demonstration.

In 2007, we repeated this with two of the university’s herds. The same herd used in 2003 was used and again followed very similar conditions in 2007 with the calf crop (65 calves) split into two groups both remaining on stockpiled grass with up to 4 lbs of supplement of a 2/3 soyhull 1/3 dried distiller grains blended pellet. One group again was fenceline weaned while the other was moved out of sight of the cows but remained on pasture. These calves again performed exceptionally well on stockpiled grass gaining close to 4.5 lb/d the first seven days post-weaning. At the other farm, the calf crop was split into two groups (39 and 37 calves per group) and placed in drylots with access to grass hay and supplement. Again, one group had fenceline access with dams and the other group was out of sight of the dams. These calves were younger than the other farm as well as being of a different genetic base, weaned one week later, and were not on pasture during the weaning period. These two groups of calves being in the drylots had average daily gains of only 1.1 lb/d during the first week post-weaning. After the first week, calves were then comingled and managed as a single group. After a 28-d backgrounding period, there was no difference in calf weight gain supporting our previous findings and Buskirk’s.



Granted neither of these were replicated research trials. However, each calf crop (54, 65 and 76 calves) when split into half had a number of calves representative or larger than many of our calf crops found on Kentucky operations. Many folks indicate that calves simply do not gain during the first week post-weaning due to the stress of weaning. Looking at 1.1 lb/d gain during the first week after weaning in our work, I’d have to agree as I don’t think folks would be able to visualize a calf that was only 5-10 lbs heavier. However, consider what management is being applied to calves at weaning and its impact on subsequent gains. In the demonstrations above, bull calves were castrated at 3-4 months of age, calves were vaccinated pre-weaning and boosted at weaning, not hauled, had access to clean, fresh water and weaned at a time the long range forecast presented dry weather.

What can we take away from all this? Weaning management certainly can impact the immediate, early performance of calves and under certain conditions calves can gain quite well immediately after weaning. Using high quality stock-piled forage can support rates of gain that should not be overlooked as an opportunity to reduce preconditioning expenses especially those considering short post-weaning periods prior to selling calves. Lastly, even though there appears to be some advantage to immediate post-weaning gains from fenceline weaning, this benefit appears to be lost with longer feeding periods. Here's to tipping the scales at weaning.

### **Preg Check Your Cows.....Please!**

*Dr. Les Anderson, Beef Extension Specialist, University of Kentucky*

Well, it's that time of year for me to plead with our producers to pregnancy diagnose their cows. This year appears to be even more important than the last few. The University of Kentucky has about 2500 cows on various Applied Master Cattleman projects throughout the state. Many of these farms have participated in these projects for two years. Cows in all of these projects are subjected to estrus synchronization prior to either natural service or to AI. These projects are designed to either demonstrate to producers how to shorten the calving season or the production and economic efficiencies of AI. Most of these cows have been diagnosed for pregnancy and, if these farms are any indication, pregnancy rates will be unexpectedly low this year. The last couple of years, these farms have averaged 59% AI and 91% overall pregnancy rate after a 60-day breeding season. This year, our AI rate is only 51% and the average pregnancy rate is only 79.5%!

Why are the pregnancy rates so low? Great question. Our best guess is that, after two straight years of drought, the cows entered calving in a lower body condition and our hay quality from last summer was well below average. This nutrient challenge likely delayed many cows ability to recycle after calving even though they were subjected to protocols to induce estrus in anestrous cows. These cows likely did not start cycling until July when fertility is typically low. If you do the math, half the herd conceived on one day and only half of the remaining cows conceived to the bull. I am tempted to blame the bulls but I have observed lower reproductive rates on numerous farms scattered across the entire state of Kentucky. Actually, I have observed normal reproductive rates in only 2 farms total this spring.

I hope "preg checking" is an annual ritual for your herd. If you have not incorporated this management practice in the past, please do so this year so that you won't be feed non-productive females this fall and winter. When it comes time to cull cows from your herd, pregnancy status is one of the first criteria that will determine whether a cow stays in the country or goes to town.

According to the results of a survey conducted by the [National Animal Health Monitoring System](#), fewer than 20 percent of beef cow calf producers used pregnancy testing or palpation in their herd. However, the benefits of this practice are fairly simple to realize. First of all, pregnancy diagnosis allows producers to identify "open" or nonpregnant cows. Compare the roughly \$5 per head cost of a pregnancy exam with the \$100-200 per head cost of hay alone to feed an open cow through the winter (if you can find hay for \$30 per roll). It's easy to see that pregnancy testing quickly pays for itself.

Second, pregnancy testing will provide a producer an estimation of when cows will be calving based on the age of the fetus at the time of the pregnancy exam. An average calving date can be calculated and the producer can use this information to better supplement, the cows through the winter. Remember, the nutrient needs of cows vary throughout their production cycle; cows nutrient requirements are highest immediately before and after calving and are lowest in the second period of pregnancy. Knowledge of the

stage of pregnancy can help producers make efficient feeding decisions. For example, most producers will have hay of varying qualities in storage. Since cows in the second period of their pregnancy require less nutrients, producers can target their lower quality feedstuffs for the time when their cows nutrient requirements are the lowest. Alternatively, producers can save their best quality feedstuffs for the post-calving period when a cow's nutrient requirements are the highest. Thus, obtaining the pregnancy status of your cowherd will allow a producer to adjust the supplementation in a timelier manner.

Finally, if the herd needs to be culled and pregnant cows need to be sold due to drought and lack of pasture, knowing the pregnancy status of the cows will be appealing to potential buyers. Buyers will be looking to purchase cows that will calve closely in line with the cows already in their own herds.

Pregnancy diagnosis is a quick and simple procedure that requires an experienced veterinarian. Two practical methods for pregnancy diagnosis can be used in beef cattle: 1) rectal palpation and 2) transrectal ultrasonography. Rectal palpation is most common and is an accurate form of pregnancy diagnosis that can be performed after day 45 of pregnancy. Many veterinarians are proficient at rectal palpation, and this procedure requires little time in the squeeze chute. Transrectal ultrasonography, commonly referred to as ultrasound, can be used to detect pregnancy as early as 28 days with a high degree of accuracy. This method can be employed just as quickly as rectal palpation when done by a skilled technician and may provide additional information that cannot be determined by rectal palpation. Using transrectal ultrasonography, the technician is actually "looking" at the fetus and can determine the viability of the fetus and the incidence of twins. It is also possible to determine the sex of the fetus between days 60 and 90 of pregnancy.

A final piece of information to keep in mind is to sell cull cows early. The market for cows is usually good through September, and then the price goes south at a fairly rapid pace until it bottoms out in November. So, pull the bulls at the end of the breeding season, schedule to pregnancy check your cows about 45 days later, and get rid of the open cows and other culls before cow prices take a nose dive.

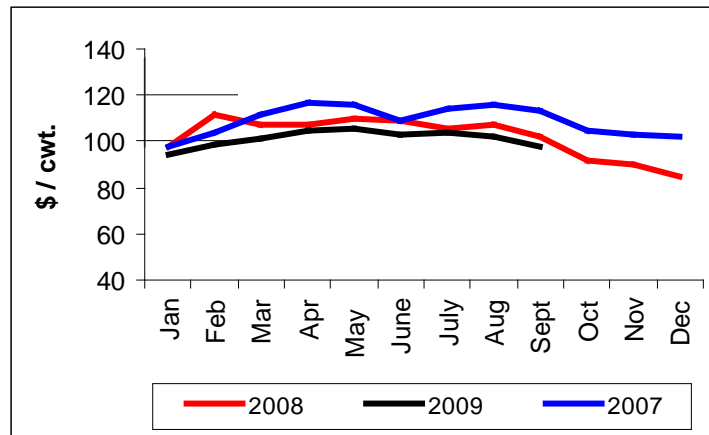
So PLEASE have pregnancy diagnosed in your cows. It will save you money.

## **Kentucky Beef Cattle Market Update**

*Kenny Burdine, Livestock Marketing Specialist, University of Kentucky*

The fall calf market slide appears to have begun. Kentucky prices for 5wt steers stayed above \$100 per cwt for most of the summer, but have fallen by about \$5 in early September (see chart below). This drop is primarily seasonal as slaughter cattle prices remain in the low-mid \$80's. The corn crop continues to look quite large, which has prevented any major rallies in corn. The feeder cattle market appears to be looking for some direction on beef demand next year. Reports from the west suggest that this should be a solid year for wheat grazing, which will likely help set the undertone for the fall calf market.

Kentucky Auction Prices  
500 to 600 lb Medium / Large Frame #1 Steers



Source: KY Livestock and Grain Market news

We are quickly approaching weaning time, which is so crucial for cow-calf operators. In a year like this one, where profit has been hard to come by, post-weaning decisions are especially important. The year 2008 was a brutal one for post-weaning programs as the market slid downward from August to the end of the year. Despite solid premiums in some programs like CPH-45, the lost value between weaning time and sale time was too much to overcome.

I would encourage producers to look at 2009 with a fresh set of eyes and not base this year's decision strictly on last year. The calf market is stronger than it was last winter, and feed prices are likely to be lower. So, sit down and work through a breakeven before you decide how to market this year's calf crop.

Step 1 is to access the value of calves at weaning time. Producers should carefully examine market reports for similar types of calves. From there, a realistic estimate should be made about what the calves are likely to bring at weaning. This becomes the starting point for the pre-conditioning analysis.

Step 2 is to add estimated preconditioning costs. Producers should figure expenses for feed, mineral, medicine, labor, interest and any other legitimate expense to the program. Whenever possible, actual costs should be quoted for purchased inputs.

Finally, a breakeven can be estimated by adding the weaning value to those preconditioning expenses. This is the amount of revenue needed for the producer to cover the value of the weaned calf and all preconditioning expenses. This total can then be divided by the expected weight of the calf to figure a breakeven price per lb.

Once a breakeven price has been figured, an informed decision can be made. Producers can look at the current market report and see how their breakeven price compares to the current prices for calves in that expected weight range. Futures markets and seasonable price indices can also be used to get some feel for market direction during that time period. By working through this process, one can decide if preconditioning makes sense in 2009, without be biased by outside factors.

## **Roberts Agricultural Commodity Market Report**

*Mike Roberts, Commodity Marketing Agent, Virginia Tech University*

**LIVE CATTLE** futures on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) were down on Monday. The OCT'09LC contract closed off \$0.025/cwt at \$86.675/cwt. DEC'09LC futures closed at \$86.825/cwt; down \$0.275/cwt and \$1.400/cwt lower than last report. The October contract came near an 11-week low while December futures fell to its lowest level in 6 months. End-of-month position squaring was noted. Losses in equities and weakness in energy markets was a noted influence. USDA last Friday put the Choice Beef cutout at \$143.44, down \$0.16/cwt but \$0.30/cwt higher than this time last week. Cash cattle traded \$1-\$1.50/cwt higher at auctions but demand is seen as weakening ahead of the Labor Day holiday and short processing week. USDA put the 5-area price at \$84.40/cwt; \$2.30/cwt higher than this time last week. According to HedgersEdge.com, average packer margins were lowered \$9.10/head from last week to a positive \$40.10/head based on the average buy of \$83.52/cwt vs. the average breakeven of \$86.59/cwt.

**FEEDER CATTLE** at the CME were off on Monday. The SEPT '09FC contract closed down \$0.90/cwt at \$97.250/cwt. The OCT'09FC contract closed at \$97.425/cwt; down \$0.625/cwt and \$3.025cwt lower than last report. DEC'09FC futures closed at \$98.025/cwt; off \$0.525/cwt. Sell stops; back-month bear premiums to the CME index; bear spreading; and lower live cattle pressured feeders the entire session. Cash feeders were steady to weak in Oklahoma City. The CME Feeder Cattle Index for Aug. 27, 2009 was placed at \$99.45/cwt, off \$0.20/cwt and \$1.21/cwt lower than last Monday. It is a good idea to sell feeders when ready.