

# “Is she bred, Doc?”

## Pregnancy ultrasound gives producers a profitable advantage

by Rebecca Mettler for *American Red Angus Magazine*

**“Will she give me a calf or is she open?” This is one of the most important – and profit-related – questions beef cattle producers ask themselves. And knowing the answer sooner, rather than later, can easily justify the cost of pregnancy ultrasound in a beef herd.**



Cliff Lamb, Ph.D.



Dr. JJ Hovde, DVM



Jeff Dewitz

According to Cliff Lamb, Ph.D., assistant director and animal science programs professor with the University of Florida, North Florida Research and Education Center in Marianna, Fla., it all comes down to an opportunity gained or an opportunity lost when calculating the value of pregnancy ultrasound.

With annual maintenance costs of \$400 to \$600 per cow, it's important for producers to get a calf out of a cow each year. Below is a chart representing the value of pregnancy ultrasound in relation to the annual maintenance costs on a per-cow basis.

“For people who don't use any form of pregnancy diagnosis, the cost of not doing anything is much greater than having the procedure done,” Lamb said.

Another simple math lesson will confirm the importance of pregnancy ultrasound for heifer development operations.

Dr. JJ Hovde, DVM, of High Plains Veterinary Clinic in Sidney, Mont., performs 60,000 pregnancy ultrasounds a year and has many clients that operate heifer development programs.

“The first and biggest reason I do it is to tell what cycle they got bred in; A.I., second or third cycle,” Hovde said.

Clients report premiums easily reaching \$100 per head for confirmed artificial insemination (A.I.) bred heifers via pregnancy ultrasound.

Lamb's Example Scenario	
Herd Size:	100 head
Pregnancy Rate:	95%
Number of Open Females:	5 head
Cost to Maintain 5 Open Females at rate of \$400/head/year:	\$2,000
Pregnancy Ultrasound Fee at \$5/head*:	\$500
<b>Dollars Saved by Pregnancy Ultrasound vs. Keeping Open Females:</b>	<b>\$1,500</b>

## “Is she bred, Doc?”

“There’s definitely a premium paid but it depends on the year,” Hovde said. “But it’s absolutely worth it for them.”

Knowing the calving dates allows sellers to split heifers into groups of A.I.-bred females, second-cycle bred and third-cycle bred females.

Hovde even has clients that sell groups of heifers who were bred in the first 10 days of the cycle, the second 10 days of the cycle and so on; resulting in a very short calving season for the purchaser of the heifers.

Pregnancy ultrasound also gives producers the ability to confirm pregnancies sooner than other methods of pregnancy detection.

Earlier detection of pregnancy can be economically advantageous with heifers especially. If pregnancy ultrasound is performed early enough the open heifers can still be sold into a favorable yearling market.

“There’s a premium in August compared to October or November in most years that will pay for the cost of the ultrasound,” Hovde said.

### Time is Money

The benefits of pregnancy ultrasound go beyond the added monetary value. The additional information gained by pregnancy ultrasound can mean added efficiency at the ranch.

“The best management decision we have made over the last 10 years is to pregnancy ultrasounding,” said Jeff Dewitz, commercial Red Angus and Simmental cow-calf producer from Steele, N.D.

“Commercial cattlemen ultrasound heifers to estimate calving dates to make it a lot easier to calve out heifers,” Hovde said. “If I can go in and determine which were caught



*This ultrasound scan shows the skull of a 77-day-old fetus.*

with A.I. or the cleanup bull, they can sort them at calving time.”

Sorting females by calving dates is ever so important in the northern climates when calving in the winter months. Many ranchers have calving facilities with a limited amount of space. If calving dates are estimated via pregnancy ultrasound, the rancher has the ability to house the females with closer calving dates in the barn while leaving the later calving females outside.

“It enables us to sort cattle by an ultrasound timeline and can be very beneficial during unfavorable weather patterns,” Dewitz said.

“You still have to watch them,”



*Depending on the age of the fetus, an ultrasound technician can determine both the age and sex. This 88-day-old fetus is a bull calf.*

Hovde said referring to the later calving females. “They can calve two weeks early but you don’t have to babysit them. It reduces the labor intensity of calving season.”

Hovde said that pregnancy ultrasound is also used to identify twin births. Producers then know to watch cows carrying twins closer, giving them a better chance to save more calves.

Dewitz runs 480 head on his operation and his main purpose for pregnancy ultrasound is to identify twin births. Generally, four to five percent of pregnancies will result in twins on his ranch.

“At the time of ultrasound we tag with a secondary tag so everybody checking cows at calving time knows she will have twins,” Dewitz said. “We will give aide to her and assist them earlier.”

### Bull or Heifer?

At 55 to 95 days into pregnancy, fetal sex can be determined with ultrasound. This feature can also be helpful for cattlemen who develop and market heifers.

“Buyers have the opportunity to buy heifers with either sex (fetus) and different people are looking for different things,” Lamb said.

Though Hovde sees fetal sexing as one of the lesser-valued bits of information because it can’t be changed, he has clients that use the knowledge to assist in herd management.

Hovde described a scenario where commercial cattlemen will sort a large group of cows by the sex of the calf they are carrying.

“On shipping day the calves are already sorted. They don’t have to sort the steers from the heifers.

## “Is she bred, Doc?”

With 600 head of calves to wean and steers to ship out they only have to deal with one set and they can wean heifer calves on a different day,” Hovde said.

Though Dewitz finds pregnancy ultrasound favorable for his ranch, from a timing standpoint he questions whether it’s right for everyone.

Typically cattle are out to pasture during ultrasound time and are far from home. He finds it helpful that Dr. Hovde brings his own hydraulic chute and all the equipment needed leaving Dewitz to provide only the holding pen and alleyway.

“He makes it as easy as he possibly can,” Dewitz said.

### **Searching for More Than a Fetus**

Diagnosing reproductive tract prob-

lems via ultrasound is also an effective way to manage herd health.

With pregnancy ultrasound, unlike palpation, Hovde can determine if the fetus is alive. If a herd has too many dead fetuses, diagnostic tests can be performed to see if a reproductive disease such as Leptospirosis is present.

“It gives you a year’s head start on detecting diseases such as Lepto,” Hovde said.

Lamb cited utilizing ultrasound for reproductive tract development in heifers. He said that before the breeding season even starts producers could determine which heifers’ reproductive tracts are fully developed and ready for breeding.

### **Why Not Try It?**

Despite the fact pregnancy ultrasound



and other forms of pregnancy diagnosis provides valuable information to producers, Lamb stated that only 20 to 25 percent of producers use pregnancy diagnosis.

“It’s extremely important for producers to consider pregnancy diagnosis,” Lamb said.

Both Hovde and Lamb agree that pregnancy ultrasound is a management practice that can easily pay for itself in many scenarios. ■