

News Column

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For Release 11/30/15
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ESTROUS SYNCHRONIZATION AND BABOONS

I saw Cliff Lamb at the Range Beef Cow Symposium in Loveland, Colorado two weeks ago. Cliff was on the program and is now the assistant director and a professor at the North Florida Research and Education Center at the University of Florida.

But, let's back up a few years.

I met Cliff Lamb about 20 years ago. I had hired him to judge the Clay County Fair's 4-H beef show while he was a graduate student at K-State and living in Manhattan. I don't remember which year it was — sometime between 1993 and 1996 — but I can still picture the calf that won, and I haven't forgotten Cliff's story about trying to farm in an area highly populated by baboons.

Cliff grew up in Zimbabwe, Africa. Zimbabwe isn't quite South Africa, but it's close. So, there is more to the story than baboons (think apartheid) but the baboon story stuck with me.

The Lamb family was a part of what would have then been the ruling class and, as I understood at the time, they were fairly large farmers. One of their crops was corn and I think it's safe to imagine their corn fields looking like fields here in America. The terrain might have been different, but the long rows of corn would have been just like ours.

If you are a gardener, you understand the challenges you encounter with racoons when trying to grow sweet corn. Racoons can wipe you out. If you're a corn farmer, you may have experienced significant deer damage. In Zimbabwe, the problem wasn't racoons or deer. The

problem was baboons.

As Cliff told the story, the baboons weren't very bright. A baboon would start at one end of a long row and when he came to a nice ear of corn, he would pick it and put under his arm. Then he'd move on down the row, find another ear, pick that ear and put it under his arm. After doing this several times, the baboon would emerge at the other end of the field with just one ear of corn under his arm, not realizing he was dropping the previous ear every time he put another one under his arm.

So, what does this have to do with estrous synchronization? Absolutely nothing... except for Cliff Lamb being the common character in both stories.

In 2008 Lamb took over managing the North Florida Research Center's 300 cow beef herd. During the two prior years, 2006 and 2007, calves had been born over a 141 day spread, with a mean calving date of about day 80. This was with a supposed 120 day breeding season.

The pregnancy rate was 81% in 2006 and 86% in 2007. That's not so good. A realistic goal would be more like 92 to 95% pregnant in maybe a 70 day breeding season.

Lamb's plan was to synchronize cows and use a timed artificial insemination program to both shorten the breeding season and to improve calf quality and weaning weights. The goal was to have more calves born earlier in the breeding season, resulting in heavier calves at weaning and market time.

Condensing a 30 minute presentation into a just a couple of paragraphs, fast forward to 2013 and the same cowherd achieved a 93% pregnancy rate with a 70 day breeding season. The mean calving date was day 38.7. The increase in calf value was \$169 per cow, and the whole herd increase in calf value was about \$51,000 per year in the final year of the project.

The key point here is actually not the AI program, but is the synchronization program

instead. Using CIDRs (controlled internal drug release) to “jump start” a set of cows can get them cycling sooner, resulting in more calves born earlier in the breeding season. It doesn’t matter whether they settle to the AI bull or not, there will still be more calves born early in the calving season.

A CIDR is an intravaginal progesterone insert, often used in conjunction with hormones, to synchronize estrous in beef females. In addition to synchronization, it also has the effect of stimulating the onset of estrous in a percentage of females that aren’t already cycling.

The arguments against synchronization and AI would include added cost and increased labor. The out-of-pocket costs can be offset and recouped by an increase in calf value. And, if you are able to cut back on the number of bulls you need, then you can probably synchronize and AI for less than it would cost to own another bull.

The labor issue is one you’ll just have to work out. In the end, you might be able to do what they did at North Florida — re-invest the money in better facilities, making the job easier and the workforce happier.

What’s the bottom line? More dollars in your pocket if you employ a synchronization and timed AI program.

Think about it.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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