



DAIRY CATTLE REPRODUCTION COUNCIL

Q&A

Dr. Kevin McSweeney, Bovine Reproductive Specialists

As reproductive challenges in the dairy industry continue to change, there's no better way to learn about new challenges and victories than from someone living reproductive management on a day-to-day basis. Reproductive veterinarian Kevin McSweeney is based in Denver, Colo., and shares with us trends in reproduction and advice to producers when it comes to getting cows bred.

1. Tell a little about yourself. Where you are originally from, where you attended college, how you got involved in your current area of expertise, etc.

I grew up raising dairy and beef replacement animals in Virginia. My father had a good friend who was a veterinarian and was doing a lot of surgical embryo transfer at the time (this was the late '70s before nonsurgical ET had been developed). I started working for him and caught the repro bug at an early age.

I majored in Dairy Science at the University of Georgia. After graduating, I went back to Virginia and managed a dairy in the Shenandoah Valley for a couple of years. In 1996 I moved to Colorado and was a herdsman on a couple of big dairies. I also started working for Dr. George Seidel, a reproductive physiologist at Colorado State University, who was doing extensive research toward sexing semen with XY, Inc., at the time. Through these research projects I was able to learn many advanced reproductive techniques, such as ultrasound, which I use in my practice today.

After veterinary school, I did a master's project that was focused on dairy cattle reproduction. During the project I was able to develop reproductive protocols that I thought I could apply in a specialty veterinary practice. Being a manager/herdsman, I saw firsthand the poor reproductive performance on large dairies and realized the need for contract reproductive services on these dairies. I envisioned a practice whose employees handle all aspects of reproductive management on client herds, such as ultrasound, artificial insemination, data recording and all injections for timed breeding synchronization programs.

2. What is your favorite part about your current occupation?

I've always enjoyed working with dairy cattle, especially in the area of reproduction. I'm in an area of the country where I can specialize in just reproduction and have a tremendous financial impact on my client's herds. It is quite satisfying to help their bottom line the way we do.

3. How long have you been working at your current occupation? What is the biggest change you have seen since starting your practice?

We have been providing contract reproductive services on large Colorado dairies for three-plus years now. The biggest change I see is the increasing demand for ultrasound, and mainly this enthusiasm comes from the dairy farmers themselves.



DAIRY CATTLE REPRODUCTION COUNCIL

4. What is different about dairy producers/dairy operations today when compared to when you started your practice?

Producers have started to refocus on the importance of reproduction and its impact on profitability. Posilac® has been a great crutch for poor reproductive performance over the last 15 years, but with the cost of springers and many cooperatives going away from rBST, the need for timely pregnancies is critical. Because of this, producers are becoming more receptive to advanced reproductive techniques to help in improving reproduction.

5. What do you see as the largest challenge facing dairy producers in regard to reproduction?

Cows have changed so much reproductively over the last 20 years that it takes much more attention to detail and a better understanding of reproductive physiology to get cows pregnant. I find that producers are reluctant to truly admit that cows have changed, and they still want to manage cows as if we were in the 1980s. Acknowledging that cows are not the same and then implementing intensive management protocols to overcome these obstacles is critical to improving reproduction. However, finding conscientious people qualified to perform these tasks is quite difficult, and dairies are left to make do, usually leading to suboptimal results.

6. What solutions/advice can you offer producers for this issue?

Being a manager/herdsman made me realize how poorly we were managing reproduction on dairies, and I saw the potential for reproduction to be contracted by a third party. When I first moved to Colorado years ago from the East Coast I was surprised to see how much work was being contracted by large western dairies, such as calf rearing and crop production. I realized producers can make more money paying someone else to focus on these areas so they can focus on milking cows. Several years ago I started such a practice and have had very good results.

7. What do producers see as their main challenge in regard to reproduction?

Finding and retaining qualified labor is quite a challenge for producers. Managing reproduction is unlike any other task on the dairy. To succeed, attention to detail has to border on obsessive-compulsive. I like to describe reproductive management as a chain, and the chain is only as good as its weakest link. If you don't strive for perfection in every aspect of reproductive management, you are doomed to poor results. Finding people that have this work ethic and are knowledgeable about reproduction is exceedingly difficult.

8. Any other information you would like to include or you think is important to note about dairy cattle reproduction?

Everything we thought we knew about the reproduction of lactating dairy cows has to be reconsidered. I would recommend to anyone who strives for reproductive success to keep an open mind. Thinking outside the box and applying new strategies to your reproductive management can pay big dividends.