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Cow Camp Chatter

Cow tales

Many of the conversations those of us in the cattle business have around the branding fire or over the hood of a truck often center on the behavior and

internal workings of the bovine. When something out of the ordinary happens to spark our curiosity, we may question if there actually might be a possible

explanation. Consider the following thought-provoking cow tales, some of which have been substantiated by research.

● Nearly every cow person at one time or another has questioned why some cows will eat the afterbirth after they've calved (placentophagia). One theory is that they eat it for bonding purposes. This may be true, but then again there are a large percentage of cows that bond with their calves without eating the afterbirth.

Some believe they eat it out of hunger or because they crave specific nutrients postpartum that are contained in the placenta. With that said, there are many well-fed cows that eat the afterbirth that have been and remain on a nutritionally sound feed program.

The most probable theory for placentophagia is the cow's natural instinct for predator avoidance — hiding her newborn calf from predators such as coyotes and wolves.

Regardless of the reason, there have been isolated cases where cows have choked and died from eating the placenta. This is especially true with first-calf heifers that are inexperienced with the calving process. Because of this, it helps if cattle producers remove the placenta from the calving area when possible.

● Occasionally a cow will give birth to a freemartin, a sterile female calf that is born twin with a male. Why did they start calling these calves freemartins? Folklore dating back to the mid-1600s claims that when European farmers had a set of male/female twin calves, they would donate the sterile heifer to the annual Saint Martin celebration. They knew from past experience that these females were generally infertile and of no use for breeding. For this reason they would donate the heifer to be slaughtered and consumed during the festivities. The free heifers donated to Saint Martin became known as freemartins.

Incidentally, it has been scientifically proven that a freemartin heifer is sterile 92% of the time as a result of exposure to masculinizing hormones produced by the male calf while in the womb. Freemartins develop physically like castrated males and are used for beef in the same way.

● Have you ever wondered if the sex of a calf has an influence on how quickly a cow will rebreed? Research by Cow Tek Inc. utilized data collected from seven major beef breeding associations representing more than 400,000 young cows. Their research was specifically designed to evaluate calving intervals in beef cows through age five.

Cow Tek found that "females weaning steer calves exhibit significantly shorter calving intervals

compared to those with either bull or heifer calves at side, possibly due to an interruption in normal suckling patterns brought about by castration. It seems logical that castration could be similar to short-term calf removal in terms of its impact on the postpartum cow.”

Cow Tek confirmed that young cows raising bull calves take a day or two longer to breed back compared to similar-age cows nursing heifer calves. This extended postpartum interval is possibly due to bull calves suckling their dams more aggressively.

• Does shipping bred cows affect pregnancy retention? Colorado State University researchers artificially inseminated cows over a three-day period and randomly allotted them to one of three shipment groups. One-third were shipped at less than 12 days after insemination. One-third were shipped after 12 days and one-third were shipped after 30 days of insemination. A depression in fertility was realized in the group that was shipped between 12 and 30 days after insemination.

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Researchers theorized that the reason for reduced problems for those cattle bred fewer than 12 days of shipping dealt with maternal recognition of pregnancy. Maternal recognition of pregnancy occurs at approximately 12 days. Their reasoning for reduced problems with shipping after 30 days of pregnancy dealt with implantation of the fetus to the uterine wall. Implantation of the embryo to the uterine wall occurs at 30 days. Bottom line, the best time to ship after a breeding program is at less than 12 days of pregnancy or more than 30 days.

• Are hair whorls — the spiral of hair that forms on the forehead of cattle — a sign of fertility and/or temperament? Research by Colorado State University looked at the location of hair whorls and found that the configuration of the whorl is an indication of a bull's fertility. Bulls with a round epicenter had a significantly higher percentage of normal sperm than bulls with an elongated, straight-line hair whorl pattern.

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• Does color influence the performance of cattle? Texas A&M evaluated factors that might enhance feedlot gain. They looked at various colors of pens and feedbunks to see

how color affected feed consumption. Results published in the *Texas A&M Beef Cattle Short Course Proceedings* showed that the color tan had the biggest influence. Cattle were more relaxed and calm. They also ate more, and performance was enhanced. Does this subject require further research?

• It's been said that cattle facing north or south when grazing or resting

are reacting to the planet's magnetic influence when doing so. It's an interesting theory, but sometimes good old-fashioned common sense is the only explanation when you hear or see something out of the ordinary.

That's enough for this month. A special thanks to my wife, Jackie, for her part in writing "Cow Camp Chatter." As always, if you would like to discuss this

article or simply want to talk cows, do not hesitate to contact me at 775-385-7665 or rtbulls@frontier.com.



Editor's Note: Catch all of Ron Torell's columns in the Angus Beef Bulletin EXTRA, the electronic supplement to the printed publication. Sign up to receive the EXTRA at www.angusbeefbulletin.com.