

Building Healthy Beef Herds

Sunflower Supreme Heifer Program initially available in Southeast Kansas, statewide rollout to come.

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A new program aimed at supporting beef cattle producers by improving the reproductive performance of replacement heifers may have come at an opportune time. The Sunflower Supreme program, developed by Kansas State University (K-State) and the Kansas Department of Agriculture, addresses dystocia or calving difficulties in heifers, as well as whole-herd health and successful breeding techniques.

This may be an especially good year to launch this program, said Jaymelynn Farney, animal science specialist with K-State Research and Extension. Recent drought conditions and related market forces pushed the number of cattle in U.S. herds to 90.8 million head as of Jan. 1, 2013 — the lowest level since 1952, according to the USDA, but there are signals some producers are beginning to expand their herds.

“At this point we are starting [the program] in southeast Kansas, but hope to make it a state-wide program by next fall,” said Farney, who is based in Parsons. “As part of this program, producers adopt effective health protocols and use some of the latest technologies and genetic

tools with the end goal of improving herd health.”

Ways to manage for dystocia concerns include using expected progeny differences (EPDs), a way of evaluating an animal’s genetic worth. Two valuable EPDs to use with first-calf heifers are calving ease and birth weight.

“All breed associations report birth weight and several report calving ease,” Farney said. “Calving ease is a better indicator of dystocia concerns in first-calf heifers because it indicates the influence of the sire on calving ease in purebred females calving at 2 years of age.”

Calving ease (CE) is reported as a percentage of unassisted births, so producers should select sires with a higher calving-ease value, which should indicate a higher percentage of unassisted calving. Calving ease combines multiple measured traits of a bull’s progeny, including birth weight and gestation length, to provide an easy-to-understand EPD to further improve dystocia concerns.

For some producers, being involved in the program will mean more recordkeeping, but they will be surprised how beneficial that can be, Farney said.

Meetings on heifer health, breeding success, nutrition, genetic evaluation and marketing are planned for those

who enroll. A quarterly newsletter and videos will provide practical, day-to-day management tips.

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The Sunflower Supreme program also aims to improve relationships between producers and veterinarians to identify a whole-herd health-management program, she said, with a focus on respiratory and reproductive health. Vaccination guidelines that are part of the program can be adapted to any operation with guidance from a veterinarian about type and booster requirements of each vaccine.

The program requires participants to receive Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) training, which encourages correct

management techniques, Farney said. This also helps guide producers as they start livestock-welfare programs and can open marketing opportunities.

Heifers that breed earlier in life have a more productive lifetime and greater profitability, Farney said. By choosing a breeding strategy and synchronization protocol, the program aims to help producers improve reproductive success. To that end, a breeding soundness exam must be completed 45 days prior to breeding to further evaluate heifers and provide enhanced reproductive success.

“We designed this program to be an educational tool for producers,” Farney said, adding that all of the guidelines can be adopted in any operation that raises replacement females. “With expanded collaboration between producers, extension, and local veterinarians, this program will add value and additional revenue to Kansas cow herds and provide quality replacement heifers to increase the demand for Kansas cattle.”

Producers interested in the program can contact their county or district K-State Research and Extension agent or visit www.SunflowerSupreme.org for additional information.

