

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

Conducting a Prescribed Burn – Planning for Success

Spring has traditionally been ‘burn season’ in Kansas. If a spring prescribed fire is on your radar, plan now to make it successful – and safe.

Much of our ability to safely conduct a prescribed burn depends on weather. Do we have enough wind to carry a fire, but not so much its dangerous? Optimum conditions usually occur when wind speeds are above five but below 15 miles per hour with relative humidities in the 50-60 percent range and temperatures between 50 and 80 degrees. You can check out wind and relative humidity fairly easily at www.mesonet.ksu.edu/fire/rh.

What kind of a stand are we dealing with? Is there enough fuel to carry a fire and can we manage heavy fuel loads that may be present? What is our purpose for burning? Cool season grasses don’t respond the same way native prairie grasses do and typically shouldn’t be burned as frequently unless a brush issue is being addressed. Even then, an understanding of how the undesirable and desirable plant community may respond is important to determining necessity.

Is equipment ready? Conditions can change rapidly during spring burns. Make sure you have equipment to provide the water flow you need to put out a fire (some ATV sprayers may not) – and people to man said equipment. Back burns should be in place and a burn boss appointed to make sure things run smoothly.

Check with local authorities first. Burn permit requirements vary by area, and many fire departments are manned by volunteers, potentially limiting response ability on busy burn days. Plan ahead to make sure burns are allowed, then follow a plan to make sure they can be conducted safely.

Prescribed fire can be a valuable tool for our forage stands when used effectively. Make sure you have a plan to help it be as effective as possible, including evaluating the necessity of it in the first place. A little forethought can make a big difference in both the effectiveness AND the safety of your spring burn.

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Rebuilding the Cowherd

Earlier in February, we had an excellent producer meeting focused on the general theme of rebuilding the national cowherd with a plan. Not only did we discuss looking at the replacement female herself, but also using risk management tools like Livestock Risk Protection (LRP), Hedging and Pasture Rangeland and Forage (PRF) insurance to provide financial protection. The risk management aspects could have an article dedicated to each topic, and likely will be down the road. Today my focus will be to share some key points to consider in heifer development discussed at the meeting.

There are factors that are outside of our control, such as input cost, markets and weather, but many factors can be controlled with management. This includes breeding/calving dates, length of breeding/calving season, genetics, nutrition, reproductive technologies, timing of buying/selling and herd health protocols. Focusing on benchmarks for production and the things that we can control with management will have lasting impact on the next generation cow herd and economics of the operation.

What are some of the benchmarks for the breeding female? Two terms come to mind, longevity and stayability. Longevity is the length of productive life, or the time that a producing cow remains in the herd. Stayability is similar and defined as the ability of a female to remain in the herd past the point in time where she recovers the cost of development. To optimize reproductive performance, a cow needs to calve by the time she is 24 months of age and maintain a 365-calving interval, with a live calf each year. To do this, she must have a calf and rebred within 82 days, which generally means two heat cycles at best. Once she has the calf and is rebred, she then needs to wean a calf that grows and performs. All of this while staying in a body condition score around 5, on minimal feed inputs.

There has been a plethora of research showing that those heifers who are born early in the calving season are more likely to reach puberty sooner, calve early themselves and offer more total pounds of weaned calf over her lifetime. Think of it in these terms, for every one day of age older a calf is at weaning generally translates into 1.7 to 2.4 more pounds, when growth potential is similar. To this point, look at your calving records to see if you reach this mark: 76% of calves born by Day 21, 87% by Day 42 and remainder born by Day 63. Work done by Funston in Nebraska shows that it takes the profit of 2 early calving cows to make up for 1 late calving cow.

Developing heifers is not a cheap venture, nor is purchasing bred heifers or pairs. Mousel et al... showed that it takes 5 to 6 calves to recover the developmental and production costs of heifers in the average cow herd. It stands to reason then that if a female is culled from the herd before this point, this increases the average development cost and doesn't contribute to the profitability and/or sustainability of the operation. This is partly why Stability EPDs have been implemented by many breed associations and operations who retain females need to keep that EPD in mind when selecting breeding animals. When investing in the replacement female, finding the one with best chance of meeting the above benchmarks should be the goal. It goes without saying, but recordkeeping and data is key to this!

This is by no means the complete discussion from the meeting, but hits on a few take home considerations. Economics is for sure a big factor in all of this as well and fortunately we've got a tremendous resource in AgManager.info to help with these contemplations. Two useful decision tools are the KSU-Beef Replacements and KSU-Detailed Cow Calf Budget tools. Both are Excel spreadsheets that allow you to input your production numbers and estimate things such as Net Present Value or the amount you can afford to pay for a replacement female. Good luck working through all the decisions that need to be made in heifer development and cowherd growth or rejuvenation.

Laura Phillips
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

Tomato Talk: indeterminate vs determinate

We are getting to the point in the year that gardeners are all planning out exactly what will go in their garden and when. One common vegetable in our gardens is tomatoes. When you are choosing tomatoes to grow, you may notice that they are often described as determinate, semi-determinate or indeterminate. But what do these labels mean and which one do you choose?

These terms refer to how the tomato will grow. They are all good options, but you might prefer one over the other based on your goals or garden space.

Determinate plants produce one large crop and then virtually nothing thereafter. They are favored by commercial growers that want to harvest most of the fruit from one picking. They then use succession plantings where a new crop is planted on a set schedule to have fruit production throughout the season. Mature plants are smaller than other types and can be planted closer together to get the most tomatoes from a set space. Primo Red, for example is a variety that is strongly determinate.

Indeterminate plants are the traditional tomatoes that never stop growing. They are capable of producing fruit throughout the season unless disease stops production or until frost kills the plant. They do best with support as they can reach six feet tall when staked or caged. Cages made from concrete remesh and t-posts often do better than the average store-bought tomato cage, as these guys will get big and need a lot of support!

Semi-determinate plants are in between the two. They more compact than indeterminate types but are also capable of producing fruit throughout the season, unlike determinate varieties. Though all three are capable of producing fruit throughout the season, our hot Kansas summers often cause a dry spell in production of both types. Tomatoes are less likely to set fruit when night temperatures remain above 75 degrees and day temperatures are above 95. Hot, dry winds make the situation worse.

When you go to the store, you likely won't see many determinate varieties. Most of the varieties available to home gardeners are either indeterminate or semi-determinate. Gardeners with limited space will likely prefer semi-determinate types to stretch out the harvest season but stay more compact than an indeterminate variety. If there is space, you may want to grow indeterminates and let them stretch out over a larger space. Or you may want to stagger determinate varieties to get large harvests all at once for canning or tomato juice. The choice is yours!

Teresa Hatfield
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

Tricare for Life Provides Military Retirees and their Families a Secure Backup for Medicare

If you are a military retiree approaching age 65 or a family member of a retired veteran, Tricare for Life (TFL) is an excellent option to pair with your Medicare benefits. Unlike Veterans Administration (VA) benefits, Tricare for Life works with traditional Medicare to provide comprehensive healthcare coverage. Tricare for Life is a benefit retired veterans have earned, and it is crucial to understand how it works.

Tricare for Life is a great benefit for military retirees; however, there are specific eligibility rules you will need to follow to use your benefit. Military retirees and eligible family members are enrolled in TFL when they have Medicare Part A and B. If you do not enroll in Part B of Medicare, you cannot use or enroll in Tricare for Life. The Medicare enrollment requirement is important to remember when you continue to use insurance through an employer. Many people delay taking Part B until they or their spouse retires and they stop using employer insurance. You will need to consider your options when you approach Medicare eligibility. It may be more cost-effective to take Medicare and TFL than to continue using employer insurance.

Tricare for Life acts as a supplement or backup to Medicare. If Medicare and Tricare cover a service, Medicare will pay first. Tricare will pay second, and the beneficiary will owe nothing. If you elect to get the care that is not covered by Tricare but is covered by Medicare (chiropractic care), then Medicare will pay as the primary payer, and TFL will pay nothing. There are also services that TFL covers but not Medicare; in this case, TFL will cover its share, and you may have to pay any deductible or cost-shares. In general, TFL is very comprehensive coverage. If you have another type of insurance, such as Medigap, TFL will pay last.

Original Medicare and Tricare for Life allow beneficiaries to choose any healthcare provider that accepts Medicare. You do not have to use a network of healthcare providers; if you seek the care of a healthcare specialist, you can do that without a referral from a primary care provider. Tricare for Life also includes a prescription drug benefit. The prescription portion of TFL is considered creditable or as good or better than a traditional Medicare Part D plan. You do not need to purchase a separate Part D plan from Medicare. You will not incur a penalty if you choose to take a Part D plan later.

Tricare for Life also provides nationwide coverage, including some foreign travel care. There are also no enrollment fees associated with TFL. Retired military and their eligible family members must be registered in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Systems (DEERS) to participate. Remember, it is required that you enroll in Medicare Part A and B as well to be eligible for Tricare for Life.

For more information about Medicare and Tricare for Life, contact Teresa Hatfield at the Meadowlark Extension District at 785-364-4125 or thatfield@ksu.edu.

Cindy Williams
District Extension Agent, Food, Nutrition, Health and Safety

Lead in Applesauce Pouches

Pouches of applesauce can be an easy treat for children. But a recent recall of certain brands of applesauce, because of lead contamination, has led to 69 complaints/reports in children under 6 years of age.

Lead is toxic to humans and can affect people of any age or health status. Protecting children from exposure to lead is particularly important because they are more susceptible to lead toxicity. Most children have no obvious immediate symptoms. Parents and caretakers should consult a healthcare provider if you suspect a child may have been exposed to lead. Short term exposure to lead could result in the following symptoms: headache; abdominal pain/colic; vomiting; anemia. Longer term exposure could result in the following additional symptoms; irritability; lethargy; fatigue; muscle aches or muscle prickling/burning; constipation; difficulty concentrating/muscular weakness; tremor; weight loss.

These products have been available, and may still be available nationally through multiple retailers, including Amazon, Dollar Tree, Family Dollar/Dollar Tree combination stores, and other online retailers.

The Food and Drug Administration recommends the following:

- Consumers should not eat, sell or serve recalled WanaBana, Schnucks, or Weis-brand apple cinnamon pouches and should discard them.
- These products have a long shelf life. Consumers should check their homes and discard these products.
- To properly discard the product, consumers and retailers should carefully open the pouch and empty the contents in the trash can before discarding the packaging to prevent others from salvaging recalled product from the trash. Clean up any spills after discarding the product then wash your hands.
- Most children have no obvious immediate symptoms of lead exposure. If there's suspicion that a child may have been exposed to lead, parents should talk to their child's healthcare provider about getting a blood test.
- Contact your healthcare provider if you think you may have symptoms of lead toxicity after eating recalled fruit pouches.
- If you or your child have symptoms or exposure to this product, you can also file a complaint or adverse event report at (<https://www.fda.gov/food/outbreaks-foodborne-illness/investigation-elevated-lead-levels-cinnamon-applesauce-pouches-november-2023#contact>) Report or serious allergic reaction.