

Black Ink: Programming For Profit

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You won't score many bonus points by suggesting similarities between the women in your life and females of the bovine persuasion, but looking at just such a comparison might help your cowherd and calf crop.

For decades, pregnant women have been told to avoid alcohol, to eat "right" and take a prenatal vitamin. New research even shows what women eat during gestation could affect the taste buds of the tiny beings they're nurturing.

All well and good, but what's that got to do with your cows?

Animal scientists have started to dig into this whole area of fetal programming and it turns out that what the cows eat affects the calves in a big way. You probably can't get them to prefer wheat straw over good alfalfa hay or create a calf that will never test the electric fence, but what you can't influence is not as important as what you can.

In spring-calving herds, late gestation starts in the late fall to early winter, headed into lean times for forage resources on many ranches. Coincidentally, and you might even say unfortunately, this could be your best chance to change for the better what's going on in the cells of your soon-to-be born calves.

In one study, when cows were supplemented during the final stages of pregnancy, birth weights and even rebreeding rates were similar to counterparts on a lower plan of nutrition. But where that extra crude protein really made the difference was in the progeny's performance. Heifer calves had increased fertility while the steer mates had higher weaning weights and greater subsequent carcass weights. The calves

from the supplemented mommas had dramatically higher levels of marbling, adding 18 points to the percentage grading premium Choice or higher. Yield grade was virtually the same.

Note: This benefits producers selling at weaning (increased weight and fertility) as well as those retaining ownership (increased weight and quality). It seems important to blatantly point that out, because so often the latter group is the main beneficiary from increased labor and expense. This time everybody wins.

A pregnant woman sipping a cup of caffeinated coffee or even splurging on some greasy cuisine is often criticized for her poor choices. For opposite reasons, ranchers who feed cake or liquid supplement in the winter might feel the derision of similar judgments.

You can just hear the critics now: "Can't your cows make their own living?"

"Do you baby them year-round?"

You can take comfort knowing that you're feeding more than just the cow. Sure, they can make it through the winter and regain body condition as they go onto spring pasture, but at what expense?

Researchers say cells are already differentiated into muscle, fat, organs or bone by late gestation, but calves in utero may still be programmed to use nutrients differently.

It almost sounds too good to be true, but obstetricians probably wouldn't argue with that logic. For decades they've known that keeping moms in good nutrition will help babies. So it might be time to pay a little more attention to your winter resources and evaluate your herd's needs with more of a long view. It could improve the fertility, weight and quality of your next calf crop – and that's more valuable than any arbitrary bonus points. Δ

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