**Do Natural-Service Bulls Get Cows Pregnant Faster Than A.I. Service?**

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| **I**f elected, I promise to . . . the check is in the mail . . . bulls get cows pregnant faster than A.I. Some statements need to be taken with a grain of salt. In my experience, these three statements start the warning bells ringing. “**I** don’t have enough cows pregnant; my former herdsman apparently lost interest in that part of the job. We need to get some cows pregnant in a hurry; I may have to get some bulls.”**T**hese statements were from a well-managed 1,200-cow dairy in northern California, and the plan to add bulls was a change from their routine. The problem was that calving projections indicated a very low percent of the milking herd was recorded pregnant. In light of the current information, the herd manager was ready to change from getting cows bred right to just getting them bred. **I**t is not often that your goal is to get as many cows pregnant as quick as possible. In the case of this herd, a review of the projected calvings by month showed that the previous herdsman had neglected the reproduction program even though the herd’s average days open and calving interval still looked healthy. Quick intervention was necessary, or the herd would have to live through a prolonged period of tail-end lactations and long dry periods. Working with the new herd manager, the following strategy was developed.**The Breeding Blitz . . .** **F**irst, the entire herd was checked for pregnancy. From the 1,200 cows milking, 10 percent were pregnant. Accurate calving information was available so cows were sorted by days open. Six hundred cows were open less than 90 days; these were divided into six additional strings and would be bred A.I. The remaining 480 cows were divided into six additional strings, and two young Holstein bulls were added per string. **A**lthough the producer was convinced of the genetic advantages A.I. offered, he was desperate to get cows bred as quickly as possible. If cows were not pregnant after 60 days in the A.I. pen, they were to be moved to the bull pens. A.I. sired cattle were the choice for future replacements; the bull strings were allowed because “bulls get cows pregnant faster than A.I.”**I**n addition to sorting the cows by days open, steps were taken to maximize the efficiency of breeding. The young bulls were visually inspected for general health and scrotal development. Two young bulls were placed in each pen, and they were replaced every three weeks. The entire A.I. program also was reviewed. Breeders were schooled on semen placement and reading chalk marks. While tail chalking is not the best heat detection method, it was the available method given the herd management situation. **T**his breeding blitz went on for 60 days before an interesting phenomenon caused us to rethink our strategy. At the 60-day pregnancy checks, we found that 60 percent of the cows in the A.I. strings were pregnant, while only 52 percent of cows in the bull strings were pregnant. **T**his development seemed too good to be true, so we came back with a seven-day post check to find any cows pregnant between 30 to 37 days that we may have missed. In the bull-bred strings, 15 percent of cows that could be pregnant were pregnant. In the A.I. strings, the pregnancy rate was 65 percent. To our surprise, we were getting cows pregnant faster in the A.I. pens than we were in the bull strings. **B**ased on this fact, we had two choices. We could move all cows that were open over 60 days in the bull strings to the A.I. strings, or we could eliminate the bull strings. We eliminated the bull strings. **Real Life . . .** **O**n a 1,200-cow dairy, not much time can be spent on experimental design to test different treatments. In fact, often producers discount university and industrial trials as not being “real life tests.” It was a “real life” test. Remember, this wasn’t a university experiment, so complete research protocol wasn’t followed. **F**irst, while tail chalking is a popular choice for heat detection, it is not as accurate as consistent visual checks. There is little doubt that some cows were bred even though they weren’t in heat, and some cows were missed. These are problems that come with tail chalking. While tail chalking raises the insemination costs, the farm team felt it was an acceptable trade-off. **S**econd, it would have been nice to rotate the bulls more often or have more bulls in each pen. However, it wasn’t an option in the free-stall housing as two bulls are about the maximum that can be managed in a limited space. In addition, it would have been nice to do routine fertility exams on the herd bulls similar to what is done at A.I. studs. It would have been nice but not “real life.” **T**he goal was to get as many cows bred as possible in the shortest possible time. We were better able to do that with A.I. than we were with bulls. On my last visit, there were no bull pens, and the producer was very happy with the results. |

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