

TIPS & TOOLS

NORTHERN CATTLE

Calf loss – do I have a problem?

Calf loss relates to all reproductive losses that occur after a breeding cow has been categorised as being pregnant, right through to weaning.

It includes:

- foetal losses (abortions)
- perinatal calf losses (newborn calves)
- weaner-aged calves prior to weaning.

There are many factors and infectious agents that can cause calf loss in a breeder herd. The first question that needs to be addressed is, 'do I have a problem?'

How do I know if I have a calf loss problem?

There are several indicators beef producers can use to assess whether they have a calf loss problem.

Presence of an aborted foetus or a dead calf

This is a highly reliable indication in small beef breeding operations where livestock are observed on a regular basis or where carcasses are observed, for example, around a watering point.

In the majority of circumstances across northern Australia, dead calves or aborted fetuses are rarely seen. Therefore, other methods to determine if calf loss is a problem should be explored.

Losses after pregnancy diagnosis

In breeding herds where diagnosis of pregnancy is routinely undertaken and non-pregnant females are culled, the number of calves weaned in relation to the number of pregnant cows retained provides a good indication as to whether calf loss is a problem.

Any inaccuracies are generally related to multiple births or initial misdiagnosis during pregnancy testing. Many producers calculate their weaning percentage based on cows retained in the herd. If only pregnant cows are retained after testing, then this provides an accurate indication of calf loss (for e.g. 92% calves weaned from pregnant cows retained is actually a calf loss of 8%).

Assessing the lactation status of each cow at weaning (i.e. is she producing milk?) further improves accuracy of the data and will determine if multiple births are the cause of any errors.

What if pregnancy status wasn't assessed?

Determining if you have a calf loss problem is a bigger challenge if routine pregnancy diagnosis was not performed.

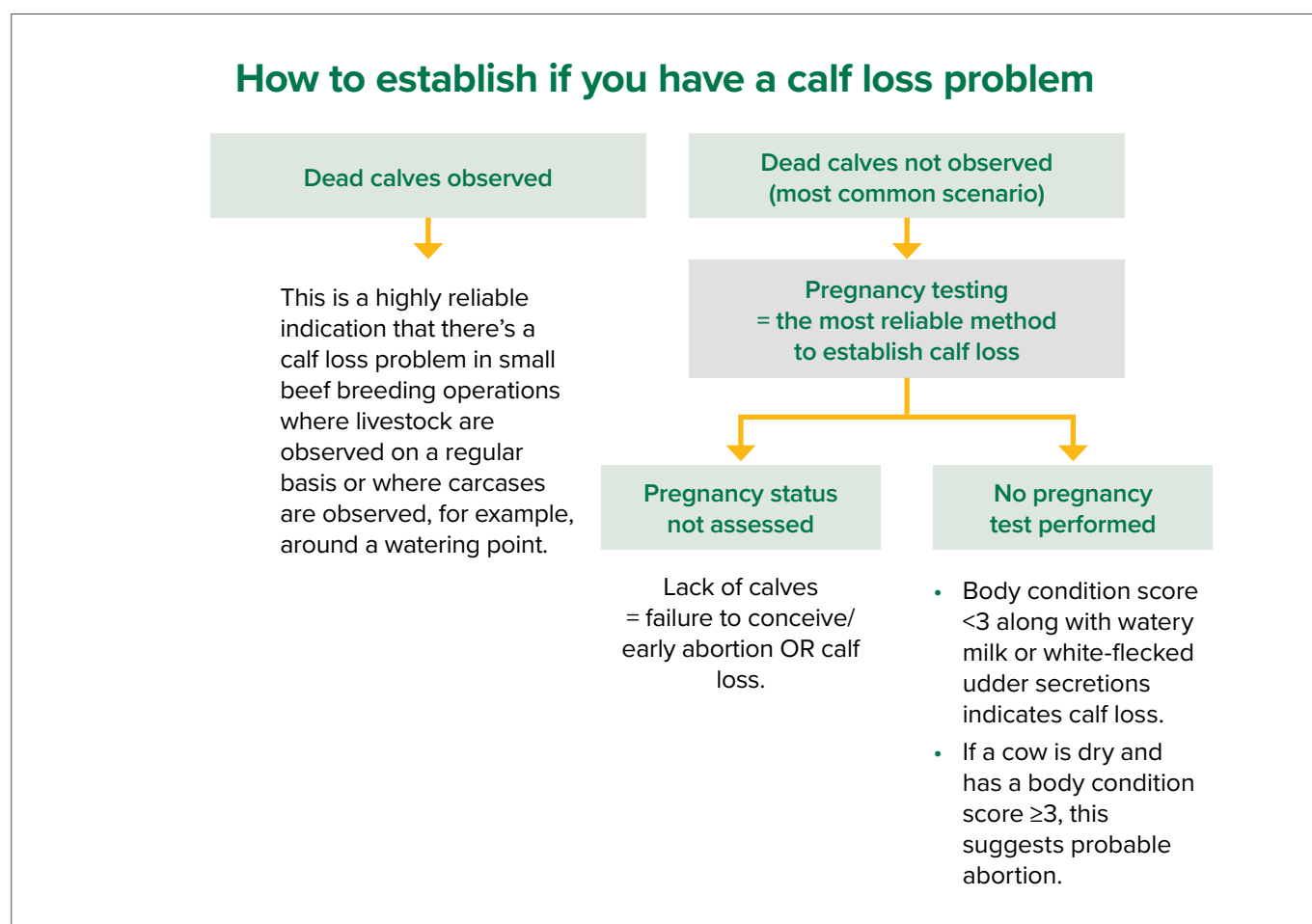
It's difficult to determine the extent of calf loss simply by the number of weaners produced or the number of cows lactating when weaned.

A lower than expected weaner percentage can be due to calf loss, but can also be associated with failure to conceive or embryonic loss (early abortion). The cause of lower than expected weaner numbers has been mainly attributed to failure to conceive (infertility).

If pregnancy diagnosis wasn't performed, best practice is to use body condition scoring in combination with lactation and udder assessment (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Establishing calf loss



Body condition scoring

An indication of calf loss in a herd where pregnancy status has not been identified can be assessed using the body condition score of the breeders. Body condition scoring can be undertaken in combination with lactation status and/or an examination of secretions from the udder.

Using body condition to assess reproductive performance

- Cows that have successfully reared a calf will usually have a body condition score of 3 or less (depending on the season and the country) and will have white, fresh milk in their udder.
- Cows that have a body condition score equal to or <3 but aren't obviously lactating and have watery milk or watery white-flecked udder secretions will most likely have calved and lost their calf.
- If a cow has no milk or udder secretions but is less than four months pregnant at the time of weaning, she has probably aborted.
- Fat cows with a body condition score of 4 or more at the time of weaning are either yet to calve, have never conceived or have aborted early.

Teat development

Heifers that have lost calves will display some degree of teat development compared to heifers that have aborted. Heifers that are sterile or abort very early have very small teats, often known as 'rose bud' teats. These animals are highly unlikely to have experienced calf loss.

Laboratory tests

Conducting laboratory tests on cows that failed to rear a weaner is an accurate method to help determine if the cause of fewer weaners is due to calf loss or infertility (refer to MLA's [Tips & Tools: What's causing reproductive loss?](#)).

In these situations, the losses have usually occurred months prior to the samples being collected. It's often helpful to obtain a good history on the breeding herd and collect samples from animals that have successfully reared a calf along with those that are being sampled for calf loss.



More information

You can download the full Tips & Tools suite at: mla.com.au/repro-performance, including:

- *What females should I sell?*
- *What joining system should I use?*
- *How do I manage heifers pre-joining to improve reproductive performance?*
- *Calf loss – do I have a problem?*
- *What causes calf loss?*
- *How do I select and manage bulls?*

Geoff Niethe

E: g.niethe@bigpond.com

Nigel Tomkins

E: ntomkins@mla.com.au

Tim Huggins

E: thuggins@mla.com.au

Disclaimer

Care is taken to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication. However, MLA cannot accept responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of the information or opinions contained in the publication. You should make your own enquiries before making decisions concerning your interests. MLA accepts no liability for any losses incurred if you rely solely on this publication and excludes all liability as a result of reliance by any person on such information or advice.

Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, all rights are expressly reserved. Requests for further authorisation should be directed to the Content Manager, PO Box 1961, North Sydney, NSW 2059 or info@mla.com.au. © Meat & Livestock Australia 2020 ABN 39 081 678 364. Published in November 2020.

MLA acknowledges the matching funds provided by the Australian Government to support the research and development detailed in this publication.

Level 1, 40 Mount Street,
North Sydney NSW 2060
P: 1800 023 100
mla.com.au

