



Take the Worry out of Your Timed AI Program

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For folks who are used to heat detection or who have never used AI before, the idea of timed AI can be a little scary. I know of more than one producer who calls it “poke and hope.” Of course, the physiology of timed AI and estrus synchronization is quite a bit more sophisticated than that. But I understand where the skepticism comes from. We set up animals on a protocol, follow a schedule, and actually perform AI at a predetermined time on one day. And amazingly, it works. Even after having used estrus synchronization and AI on tens of thousands of animals at this point, I sometimes stop and think about how incredible it is that we have come this far.

Still though, everything in agriculture can be stressful, since many things are beyond our control. A timed AI program is no exception. However, a lot of unnecessary worry is introduced into AI programs not because results are unpredictable, but because we do not have the information we need to make good predictions. Turning those “unknowns” into “knowns” can take a lot of worry out of your timed AI program.

Know As Much As Possible from the Start

First, before you even begin an estrus synchronization program, know as much as you can about the individual animals in the group. I realize not everyone is trying to run their operation like a mini research institute, but you can't know what to anticipate or correct problems unless you first know what you are working with. For cows, knowing their previous calving date is one of the most valuable pieces of information. Age of

each cow will be helpful as well, especially as you look at the performance of your younger two- and three-year-old cows. Condition of cows is another thing to be watching, both at the group and individual level. At a minimum I suggest recording IDs of cows that are less than a body condition score 5. All of this information will prove helpful as you look back at your results and think about potential improvements.

Depending on your goals and calendar, you may even consider managing some of these animals differently based on this information. For example, if you are working to shorten a long calving season, you may find it helpful to divide your herd, sorting later calving animals into a group that will receive synchronization and AI a few weeks later. Over time and over multiple years, you can work to recombine the herd by moving later calving cows up and strategically culling. Alternatively, if you plan to cull aggressively this year after weaning, you may choose not to invest in synchronization and AI at all for excessively thin or late calving cows. Another strategy I have seen used effectively is to invest in synchronization for marginal animals such as late calvers and thin cows, and only perform timed AI for these animals if they have an activated estrus detection aid before timed AI.

Extra Considerations for Heifers

Breeding heifers without any kind of prebreeding information is risky. A visual assessment of the body condition of heifers is helpful but only tells you so much. Actual weights of heifers

are also helpful, but really most useful only if you can relate it back to mature cow size. Weight and condition are really just indirect indicators of whether heifers are likely to have attained puberty. Even better, consider having a prebreeding evaluation done 4-6 weeks before breeding. A veterinarian can actually evaluate the reproductive tract directly and assign a reproductive tract score. That information is powerful: it tells you exactly what is going on for each heifer, and helps you troubleshoot your development program before breeding rather than after. You also then have an opportunity to cull-poor performers rather than investing time, money, and resources in a development and breeding program. If you have a large group of heifers with a lot of unknowns (age, size, sire, source, etc), a prebreeding evaluation can easily pay for itself and then some.

Keep Records at AI

It sounds obvious, but we really cannot troubleshoot an AI program if we do not have any information to look back on. If you are using multiple sires in your AI program, of course keep track of which sires are used on which animals. If multiple technicians are breeding---especially with different experience levels---track which technicians bred which animals. I also strongly



encourage you to apply estrus detection aids (e.g. EstroTECT breeding indicators) at the final animal handling before AI. Even if you are doing timed AI rather than heat detection, this gives you something to monitor and gives you a check point before AI. Apply those patches and record which animals did or did not have activated patches as they come through the chute for AI. Lastly, I suggest you always record the ID of an animal that acts up in the chute or is excessively stressed for some reason or another. That may be helpful information to look back on at preg check, or you may even decide that animal needs to find a new place to be a cow.

Final Thoughts

It may seem a little overkill to collect and record information like this, but that information has value. It may help you troubleshoot after the fact, avoid costs ahead of time, or find ways to improve next year. There may be just as much value in recording and analyzing your own records as there is in the AI program in and of itself. You will also go into the AI program with confidence and reasonable expectations for success. I won't promise it will ever be completely worry-free, but I bet you sleep a little better the night before--and the night after---timed AI.

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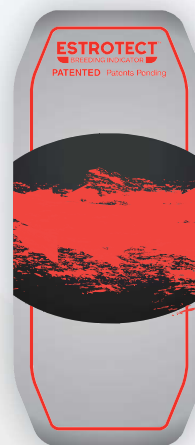
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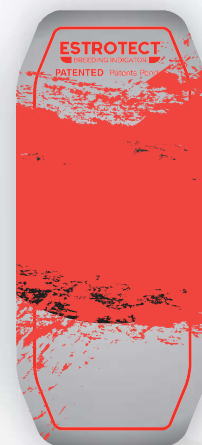
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