

Is AI and sexed semen right for you?

I have been using Artificial Insemination since 1990, mainly for registered herds, but more and more in the 2000's for commercial herds. It is a great genetic management tool that can be used to improve your cowherd tremendously. But still many cow-calf operations have avoided it like the plague for obvious reasons, its expensive, management and labor intensive, size of the cow herd matters, more trips for cattle through the chute, and the list goes on. We have come a long way in technology and management when it comes to AI and embryo work. And now with the commercial availability of sexed semen, we have even more options and opportunities to persuade the commercial rancher that AI can work for him. The dairy industry has been using sexed semen to produce replacement heifers for some time now. I am sure that we would all like the opportunity to produce the sex that would benefit our herd and the bottom line, and now you have that option. It won't be easy and it won't be fast, but the technology has some interesting aspects. The advantages of sexed semen are that you can tailor your calf crop to your marketing needs. If you're a terminal producer, you can artificially inseminate (AI) your heifers for more bull calves. If you have a maternal herd, you can AI for more heifers. If you're a seed stock producer, you can AI for more bull calves to develop into herd bulls. Early on in the efforts to commercialize sexed semen, conception rates were a real issue. That has largely been eliminated, the experts say, with conception rates now closing in on what you can expect from conventional AI. Beyond that, the disadvantages are that AI has some management limitations, especially in commercial herds. And sexed semen seems to work better in heifers than in mature cows. A lot of that has to do with managing fixed-time or split-time AI on cows with a calf at side.

AI and Embryo Transfer are well established practices in the registered cattle business and sexed semen makes sense there for sure. AI use by commercial beef producers isn't very high right now mainly because of herd size and some just like the traditional way of getting a cow bred. I had a good buddy that passed away a couple years back that done a lot of AI work on big commercial herds. He said his biggest customer in the early 2000's was the Broseco Ranch over at Mt. Pleasant. At one time they AI'd all of their commercial cows and heifers. But they didn't have the opportunity to use sexed semen at the time. So will the prospect of being able to better optimize profit potential by skewing the sex of your calf crop encourage more commercial beef producers to adopt AI? Who knows, but it should as I think profit potential will definitely increase using this technology. On operations that run a sizeable number of cows, especially in drier regions where stocking rates are less and pastures are big, AI is a major management undertaking and it may not be worth it in those areas. There are a lot more operations now days that AI their heifers so they can use that calving ease bull with good growth EPD's. And now those that raise replacement heifers can use sexed semen with good EPD's from top bloodlines, to build a product that fits demand. On the other hand if you are in the business to sell pounds of beef then sexed semen will benefit you as well whether you sell weaned calves or take them straight through to the rail. The beef business is changing and many of the old traditional methods and ways of thinking that a lot of us grew up with may be dwindling or going away. There are several factors that will determine if AI and sexed semen is for you but one major factor could be profitability and staying power! It sure deserves some pondering!

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