Lameness delays conception

Alberta Milk Producers recently held two meetings with nutritionists and veterinarians to help identify dairy research needs. At both meetings, veterinarians expressed the opinion that lameness had become a more serious problem than mastitis. In addition to concerns over animal welfare, most producers accept that reduced mobility due to lameness results in lower feed intake, restricted milk production and less willingness to mount or be mounted when in heat. Lame cows may remain open longer simply because they are more difficult to detect in heat. Recently published results of a Florida study have shown that, even when subjected to a timed insemination (Ovsynch) protocol, lame cows are less likely to conceive. Of 837 cows included in the study, 254 (30%) were lame before conception, initially identified by their arch-backed posture and abnormal gait. The table above lists the specific lesions, identified by the herd veterinarian. Most lame cows had claw lesions. Of those with multiple lesions, two-thirds had PPD and claw lesions. Sixty percent of cows with foot rot and 44% of those with claw lesions were culled during lactation, compared with 33% for the healthy cows.

Data in the Conception Likelihood column of the table above indicate that lame cows with claw lesions were 52% as likely, and cows with multiple lesions were only 31% as likely to conceive as healthy cows. Both of these estimates were statistically significant. As a result of their poor conception rates, lame cows also took longer to become pregnant. While the median healthy cow (the cow in the middle of the group ranked by days in milk at conception) conceived at 100 days in milk, the median cow in the claw lesion group took 140 days; the median cow in the multiple lesion group took 170 days.