Is it a Good Idea to “Cherry Pick” Cows in a Synch Protocol?

Ever since the first estrous synchronization protocol was developed more than 15 years ago, researchers and dairy producers have debated the merits of “cherry picking,” or artificially inseminating (A.I.) cows that come into heat before the protocol is completed.

The answer has shifted back and forth over the years, but the latest advice is to adapt your strategy as dictated by herd performance.

For herds that struggle with estrous detection—whether due to facility limitations, personnel limitations, poor estrous expression, poor conception rates for cows bred at detected estrus or because the dairy prefers not to observe for estrus daily—100% A.I. protocols are probably the best way to go, notes the Texas AgriLife Extension dairy team.

However, for herds with adequate estrous detection accuracy, the number of pregnancies per A.I. of cows inseminated at estrus, in general, is similar to or greater than the number of cows inseminated at a fixed time.

DATA FOR THOUGHT
Research at the University of Minnesota that evaluated the reproductive and economic performances of cows submitted to Presynch-Ovsynch with or without cherry picking, put some numbers to this premise. It tracked seven large herds throughout the United States that featured freestall or dry-lot facilities.

In this study, cherry picking was defined as breeding cows that displayed estrus between the second dose of prostaglandin in the Presynch protocol and the beginning of the Ovsynch protocol.

Results from this study showed that pregnancy per A.I. after the first breeding was not different between cows in the cherry picking group and those that completed the 100% timed A.I. protocols.

Plus, when data was analyzed for the rate at which cows became pregnant, inseminating 100% of cows at a fixed time did not improve reproductive efficiency.

The importance of recordkeeping is one crucial step to keep in mind if you decide to cherry pick in your herd. Experts suggest that if you choose to breed off of heats rather than follow a synch program schedule, it is critical to keep management records up-to-date and/or mark the cow to alert others she has already been bred.
WHAT TO DO?

“Ultimately, dairies that can achieve acceptable estrous detection rates and conception rates should not utilize 100% timed A.I., as this only increases synchronization costs without improving fertility,” says Todd Bilby, Texas AgriLife Extension dairy specialist.

But that doesn’t mean that synchronization programs are not needed. To the contrary, synchronization programs remain an essential reproductive tool. “A robust synchronization program is still important as insurance that all cows are inseminated by a certain number of days in milk,” Bilby says.

However, focusing on improving estrous detection and accuracy is very important and decreases synchronization costs if a dairy is able to adequately and consistently perform these essential tasks.

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To view various reproductive protocols implemented on dairies, go to the Dairy Cattle Reproduction Council reproduction protocol sheet.

Work with your veterinarian and reproductive management team to develop the right strategy for your situation.