

LIVESTOCK

Ohio lab offers cattle pregnancy tests that save time, money

By KYLE SHARP

Since Chuck Moellendick graduated from college and returned to the 90-cow dairy farm in Fairfield County that he operates with his dad, Charles, the farm's veterinary bills have increased nearly four-fold. Milk prices have not followed suit.

Faced with that reality, the Moellendicks are always looking for ways to cut costs on the farm. That's what prompted Charles to ask Chuck to call about a product, the BioPRYN blood pregnancy test, that he read about in a farm magazine.

Chuck is glad he made the call. The Moellendicks have been using the test, in place of veterinarian palpation, for the past 1.5 years and are more than pleased with the results.

"If a vet came out and checked 60 cows in would be about \$300 to do the herd check and take three hours," Chuck said. "I can do the same amount of cows with the blood test in about an hour for about \$160."

There are more advantages than just straight cost, Chuck said. Palpation is an invasive check, and early pregnancy in cows is a fragile thing. In contrast, drawing a blood sample from a cow's tail vein is like a pinprick, and oftentimes the cows don't even get up when he does it.

"I would always have cows marked pregnant after the 40-day palpation come up open later on, so I started doing rechecks at 100 days," he said. "If you save just one calf out of 60 to 90 cows, that can save a lot of money."

With the BioBRYN test, he is able to pull blood samples himself, without using a vet, at 30 days, send the samples to the lab to be tested and get results back within the week. Because the test is

economical and quick, he rechecks cows at 60 and 90 days after breeding. This practice has shortened the breeding window by 10 to 20 days, Chuck said.

The test is just simpler.

"I spend 30 seconds on a cow drawing blood, and I can check them anytime I want," Chuck said. "The vet doesn't have to work me in, and I can go by my schedule instead of his."

The blood-sampling routine also allows Chuck's kids, Camden, 10, and Ava, 8, to be involved.

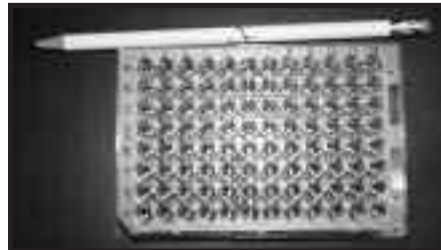
"My kids like it because they can go out and help me by handing me sample bottles and carrying the check list," Chuck said. "Now it's a family activity."

His veterinarian argues that by not having him out to check the herd as often, other health problems may be missed. But Chuck thinks the benefits of using the blood test far outweigh any potential problems.

"I don't mind paying someone to do the job, but when the vet prices have gone up where they have and milk prices have not gone up near as much, you have to do something else," he said.

The BioPRYN test is made by a company called Biotracking, and when Chuck first started using the test, he sent his samples to the company's home labs in Moscow, Idaho. Today, he has a much closer option. In June, Ray Breagel opened Bovicheck Labs on his farm, Tumbling B Cattle Co. near Junction City in Perry County, only about a 20-minute drive from the Moellendicks' farm. Breagel performs the BioPRYN tests as a Biotracking affiliate lab.

Born and raised in Illinois, Breagel spent a number of years working on big ranches out West before moving to Ohio



Blood samples are placed into the wells of this grid plate for testing, and identified by letter and number. A corresponding paper grid contains written information about each samples animal and farm. A series of checks and balances throughout the process ensures samples do not get mixed up.

and starting his own cattle operation in 2001. Beyond his 25-head Angus female herd, he also performs artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) work for other cattle producers, mostly in southern Ohio. About two years ago, a friend told him about the BioPRYN test, and he used it on his own herd.

"I figured I was saving \$120 every time I would bleed eight to 10 of my own herd and send the samples to Idaho, versus calling a vet out," Breagel said. "So I was sold on the test at first after using it myself."

He also saw how well the test fit in with the AI and ET services he performed.

"We're in business to help people get their cattle bred, and this was a follow up for those customers," Breagel said.

He contacted Biotracking to see if they would be interested in an Ohio lab. The answer was yes. So last October, Breagel traveled to Idaho for a four-day training session on software, equipment, blood handling and all other aspects of performing the BioPRYN test. This June, Breagel began taking samples after acquiring all the necessary equipment to establish a lab in his home and completing a validation period with Biotracking.

His lab is one of only 18 in the United States offering the test, and the only one in Ohio. There also are five labs outside the United States. Breagel works with customers who aren't sure how to pull blood samples from the tail vein. There also is a video available on www.biotracking.com that shows how to do it.

"For most people, it's just the initial apprehension and getting over it," he said. "It's not that difficult. It really isn't."

Breagel charges \$2.50 per test and runs samples once a week, on Wednesdays. Performing the roughly 27-hour test in batches makes it more economical. Results are known usually by late afternoon on Thursday and sent to customers via fax, phone or e-mail, Breagel said.

"I get excited every week when I'm working with the blood. To see if a cow is pregnant or not is like opening a present on Christmas," he said. "It's also nice to know how accurate I've been with my AI conception rates, and now I know it before my customer does."



Ray Breagel has established Ohio's only BioPRYN blood pregnancy test lab, Bovicheck Labs, on his Perry County farm, Tumbling B Cattle Co., near Junction City. Because he has been doing artificial insemination and embryo transfer work for cattle producers for years, Breagel considers the pregnancy testing an extension of his cattle breeding business.

As his customer base grows, Breagel anticipates running samples additional days. He'd like to have customers throughout Ohio and surrounding states. Currently, he runs about 250 to 300 tests a month from roughly 40 customers. About 60% are dairy farms and the rest beef. Breagel would like to expand to doing 20,000 to 30,000 samples a year.

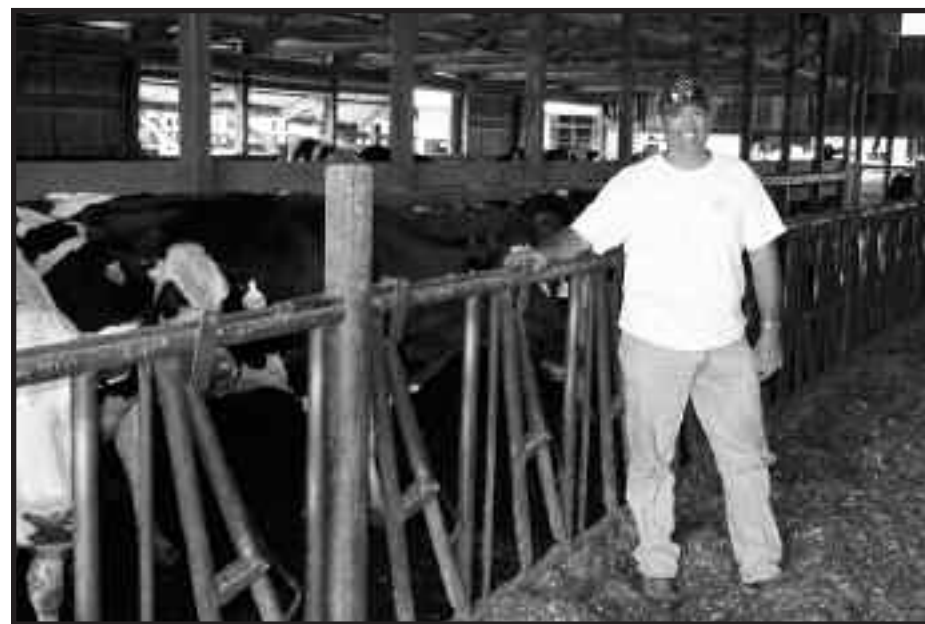
BioPRYN tests for Pregnancy Specific Protein B (PSPB), which is detectable in the blood of cattle at 30 days post breeding if an embryo is present. The test is more than 99% accurate when the test report says a cow is open and 93% to 95% accurate when saying a cow is bred. One example of why it's not 100% accurate is if an embryo is aborted a day or two before a blood sample is drawn, residual PSPB levels may still be in the blood, Breagel said.

Although the test was not designed to determine days pregnant, by looking at the test results, some customers are able to determine if a cow was bred through AI or later using a cleanup bull. For example, cows bred 30 days usually have PSPB levels in the 0.2 range, while cows at 60 days pregnant are in the 0.4 range. Although Breagel can't swear to the accuracy of this, some customers do it, he said.

Moellendick is sold on the BioPRYN test. He believes as more people learn about the option, it's popularity will grow.

"I won't go back, unless the cost of the test spikes for some reason or a cheaper, easier test comes out," he said.

To learn more about the BioPRYN test, visit www.biotracking.com. Breagel can be contacted at 740-342-5320 or raybreagel@esage.com.



Chuck Moellendick has been using the BioPRYN test on his 90-cow milking herd for about a year and a half and says he'll never go back to standard palpations to check for cow pregnancies. The blood test is simpler, less invasive and much cheaper, he said.