Trich or Treat
Heat stress isn’t only reason for open cows

Halloween did not come early this year but June was still frightening to several cow-calf producers in Iowa. The sexually transmitted disease, Trichomoniasis, was diagnosed for the first time in recent memory on two Southern Iowa farms.

Trich is caused by a protozoan that is carried by perennantly infected bulls and transmitted to cows during breeding. Cows will usually conceive but then experience embryonic loss. After 45-60 days the cow will be able to clear the infection and if she gets bred again will normally be able to maintain the pregnancy.

Typically a herd usually isn’t diagnosed with Trich-positive animals until after the farmer experiences 30-70% late bred or open cows. That can be financially devastating for an individual farm operation. However, if the disease gets a substantial foothold in Iowa the cost will be felt by all Iowa cow producers.

Many Western states have severe movement restrictions on breeding animals and extensive testing programs because of Trich. Additionally, culled values will decrease because options are limited to slaughter only.

Most infected herds have some common history regarding management practices. Some common risk practices are: (1) purchasing open cows or non-virgin bulls (or leasing bulls), (2) retaining open cows from year to year or rolling into a full herd, and (3) comingling with another herd.

Should you test for Trich?

The diagnosis of Trich in Iowa this year came after many producers already had bulls prepared to go to pasture, so widespread testing this summer will be difficult to determine the full extent of the problem. If you had lower than expected pregnancy or calving percentages this past year, then it would be advisable to test for Trich as soon as possible.

Other cow-calf producers should take precautions to make sure they don’t introduce Trich into their herds. Two of the most effective actions are: (1) Don’t buy/lease non-virgin bulls. If you have a bull get hurt this summer don’t try to replace him with a used bull. There are many seedstock producers that have virgin bulls available year round. (2) Don’t buy open cows. Although a very small percentage of pregnant cows can carry Trich, open cows are a greater risk to harbor the protozoan. I would encourage producers to only buy either virgin heifers or pregnant heifers from a reputable source especially for the next year or two.

Producers should watch for an excessive number of cows cycling towards the end of the breeding season. That could be an early indicator of Trich. I recommend that all cows be preg checked this fall so we can identify any additional positive bulls/herds and prevent the spread of this disease across the state.

Contact your veterinarian about testing your bulls if you have low pregnancy rates this fall. Additionally, Trich testing should be included as part of a normal Breeding Soundness Exam on all mature bulls for the next few years.

Trich can be more frightening than Halloween; let’s treat ourselves to caution to keep Trich in check in Iowa.

Looking ahead

We can expect some regulations in the future to restrict movement of breeding animals to control the spread of the disease. However, it will take several months for these regulations to be drafted, commented on and approved. Iowa producers need to be vigilant of their own operation to keep this disease from spreading throughout the state.