This year has brought many challenges for producers. From increased production costs and unusual weather patterns, to high market prices and shortages; every facet of the goat industry has been impacted. For the last few months I have written extensively about the volatility in the global economy and about feeding strategies that may help producers increase their profits this year. With breeding season just around the corner; producers must be certain they are doing all they can to control their bottom lines. This year’s breeding decisions may play a bigger role in the profitability of many herds than ever before. As such, with the volatility of the global economy only getting worse; focusing on new and a few old strategies to ensure a successful breeding season is a producer’s best chance of making money this year.

Recently I have spoken with many producers who are reducing herd size or selling kids younger and quicker out of cash flow concerns. While the goat meat market is high, every other aspect of production has gone up as well. The cost of feeding a breeding doe or buck for a year has gone up as much as 15% for many producers across the country. This has drawn greater attention to hot spots of concern in production such as conception rates, and feed efficiency. The financial pinch that is affecting so many now make the costs of an open doe considerably higher than years past. Improving conception rates as well as making breeding decisions based on feed efficiency may be some of the best strategies a producer can strive for in the coming months. Although the conversation of improving or maximizing conception rates and selecting for feed conversion are nothing new; they are still incredibly relevant to the modern producer. No producer can ever perfectly control every part of the production equation, but there many things a producer can do to tip the scales in their favor.

Breeding Soundness Exam: Prior to turning bucks in with does, a breeding soundness exam should be completed on every buck a producer plans to use. Nothing is more frustrating than watching a buck breed a group of does only to have all of them test open 30 days later due to poor semen quality or infertility in the buck. Contacting your local vet or university is often the best way to get a breeding soundness exam completed.

Mineral Supplementation: In most cases, goats can not and do not get enough of necessary vitamin and mineral elements through browse or forage each day. Elements like Zinc, Copper, and Manganese in particular can have dramatic impacts on the fertility of both bucks and does as well as many other processes in the body. Increasing Vitamin E, Zinc, Copper, and Manganese 30 days prior to planned breeding has been shown to improve the viability of heat cycles and improve conception rates as a result. Although most grain supplements contain a level of vitamins and minerals, it is still recommended to offer additional sources of essential elements through a good balanced free choice mineral. The best way to be certain proper vitamin and mineral needs are met is to work with your nutritionist to create a program where all parts work together. This must start with forage testing as this testing data will be used to identify areas of deficiency and allow a feed and mineral program to be made that corrects these deficiencies. Do not forget the bucks! Mineral deficiencies can affect semen quality and libido as well.

Feeding for breeding: It likely comes as no surprise but what is fed and the conditioning that results matter! If a doe or buck is too fat or too skinny it will impact fertility. 30 days prior to breeding at minimum, each animal should be evaluated using (BCS) Body Condition Scoring. A breeding buck or doe should maintain a 2.5-3.0 on a 1-5 scale where 1 is skeletal and 5 is a marshmallow with legs. Proper conditioning is essential not only conception rates, but also milk production, parasite resistance and longevity. Conditioning that is too low can be just as detrimental as obesity. Either extreme must be corrected in order to yield the highest conception rates. It is not just BCS that matters however when considering nutrition’s’ impact on conception rates. The amount of protein and energy offered also has a sizable impact the number of kids conceived. Feeding ½-1 lb per goat per day of a low protein (10-12%) diet that is very high in energy for 30 days leading up to breeding and a few weeks post breeding has been shown to improve conception rates. Many producers overfeed protein during the breeding season unintentionally. Not only can unnecessarily high protein diets get in the way of successful breedings, but the extra protein is costing the producer more in his feed bill as well! Cultivating a proper BCS and feeding a high energy diet are two of the most important ways a producer can improve their breeding season outcome!

Breed with Feed Efficiency in mind: This is a graduate class approach to a more successful breeding, kidding, and marketing structure. It depends almost entirely on excellent record keeping. A great deal of effort is put into selecting and tracking traits that may seem more tangible at times, however adding feed efficiency to the selection process will dramatically improve the stock retained into the herd. One way of doing this, is by tracking the average supplement required per head per day. For instance, if a group of 100 does receives 200 lb of grain per day, the average supplement per head per day would be 2 lb. Within the group of 100 does there will be some that get fat and some that are underweight. Although dominance will play a part, the underweight does are in many cases less efficient users of the nutrition available. Each season when selecting replacements females always consider not only the productive efficiency of the family but the feed efficiency of the sire and dam as well. If for instance a particular doe in the previous example was consistently underweight, it is likely her progeny will struggle similarly. Using the average supplement offered data, one can select replacements only from the does that held more weight than necessary in a group. Does or bucks that would require more grain each year than the herd average should never be kept regardless of the merits of their other traits. When purchasing an outcross, ask questions of the breeder to gather enough data to select the most efficient animal available. Doing this consistently each year will allow any producer to breed in more efficient traits and lower the amount of supplement purchased in time. This selection also offers a direct benefit to the producer through the marketable progeny. Progeny that are more efficient users of the nutrition offered cost less in feed per pound of gain. This savings is pure profit for the producer and with the current volatility in the global economy, it is one of the best ways to improve the bottom line this year.

The world may be a mess but it is an exciting time to be in the goat industry! Breeding season is not far away yet there is still time to adjust plans where necessary to improve profitability. As producers start thinking much more about productive performance (especially in the face of dramatically increased inputs) by using breeding soundness exams, managing nutrition, and selecting for efficiency; the goat industry as a whole can become stronger. In the coming months, breeding plans will be made and if we are intentional there will be many new opportunities to make money. Are you prepared for breeding season?