

Ignored Profit Potential

Implants and ionophores represent a nearly forgotten strategy for ranch profitability.

Photo & story by
TROY SMITH, *field editor*

A good many cow-calf producers simply ignore the profit potential of calf implants. According to Karla Jenkins,

University of Nebraska Extension range management and cow-calf specialist, some 90% of feedyard cattle receive

growth-promoting implants, but fewer than 30% of U.S. beef calves receive implants during the preweaning phase of production. Jenkins figures far too many cow-calf producers are sacrificing far too much calf payweight because they mistakenly believe implanted calves will be discounted on sale day.

“I’ve had producers tell me that they quit using implants because they thought buyers wouldn’t bid as much for implanted calves,” said Jenkins, speaking during the State of Beef Conference Nov. 2-3, 2016, in North Platte, Neb.

Jenkins said any such fear is unfounded. She lamented the fact that, in a so-called technological age, a technology proven to bolster ranch profitability is so underutilized. Jenkins advised ranchers to take a new look at what implanting suckling calves might do for a cow-calf enterprise’s bottom line.

Jenkins said administering growth implants to suckling calves has been shown to increase weight gains by 4%-6% by weaning time. That could translate to 15 pounds (lb.)-30 lb. of additional weight to sell.

**Karla Jenkins said
administering growth
implants to suckling calves
has been shown to increase
weight gains by 4%-6% by
weaning time.**

“The cost of implanting runs from around \$1.33 to \$1.50 per calf,” explained Jenkins, “so implanting offers one of the highest benefit-to-cost ratios of any cattle management tool.”

Why would so many producers choose to leave it on the table? Perhaps their decisions were influenced by the development of “natural” beef programs that prohibit use of growth promotants. Producers may have shunned implants to assure their calves’ eligibility for that segment of the market and any price premiums that it might offer. Another reason may be that some calf sellers thought buyers would discount implanted calves because they do not perform as well in the feedlot, which is not true.

Jenkins cited a four-year (2010-2013) study of prices paid for calves sold at auction. It showed that no significant differences in prices paid for calves could be attributed to implant status. Sale records from more than 2.5 million calves marketed through Superior Livestock Auction video sales also show that multiple factors influence calf prices, including lot size, single sex vs. mixed lot, calf condition and more, but non-implanted calves received no



Karla Jenkins, University of Nebraska
Extension range management and cow-calf specialist, cited a four-year (2010-2013) study of prices paid for calves sold at auction. It showed that no significant differences in prices paid for calves could be attributed to implant status.

another old technology worthy of revisiting to see how it might be used in the current cow-calf enterprise. Often relegated to the list of feedlot technologies, ionophores are feed additives that may also be incorporated into the diets of grazing cattle. Technically classified as antimicrobials, but not used for therapeutic purposes, ionophores inhibit certain rumen microbes and allow for increased presence

of others more favorable to rumen fermentation.

In simple terms, ionophores help cattle derive more energy from feedstuffs, including forages. Incorporated into diets, through pelleted supplements, liquids or as part of mineral supplementation, ionophores can increase average daily gain among growing pasture cattle by 0.15 lb.-0.20 lb. per day. Ionophores also help

prevent coccidiosis and can reduce the incidence and severity of acidosis and bloat.

In case they did not know or had forgotten, Jenkins reminded producers that ionophores can be incorporated into mature cow diets, too, reducing feed requirements for maintenance or weight gain.

Editor's Note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.

A
3

premium and implanted calves were not discounted.

If producers believe there is a premium to be captured from non-implanted calves, Jenkins advises those producers to market calves directly to a non-hormone specialty program. Typically, the producer must become "aligned" with the target program that contracts for calves meeting program specifications. There is little evidence of producers earning any bonus on non-implanted animals consigned to a feeder-calf auction.

Jenkins also said some cattle producers worry about consumer perceptions regarding the hormone content of food. All meats contain hormones, because animals produce these chemical substances naturally. To help consumers put this in perspective, producers should understand and be able to explain that a 3-ounce (oz.) serving of beef from a non-hormone treated animal contains about 1.3 nanograms of estrogen. A 3-oz. serving of meat from a hormone-treated animal contains about 1.85 nanograms of estrogen — a difference of 0.5 nanogram.

Compare that with a daily birth control pill, which will contain anywhere from 20,000-50,000 nanograms of estrogen. Additionally, a non-pregnant woman produces 480,000 nanograms of estrogen per day, naturally. Therefore, any additional hormone from implanted beef is minute by comparison.

Jenkins said that calf implants, like any technology, must be used correctly in order to receive the desired return. She offered the following list of considerations for achieving optimum results:

- Use appropriate implant for suckling calves.
- Calves should be at least 30 days of age when receiving implants.
- Heifer calves may be implanted one time as a nursing calf, with no negative impact to subsequent reproductive performance.
- Do not implant bull calves.
- Use proper implanting technique.

Ionophores

Jenkins said ionophores represent