

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Feeder-calf marketing: Who has marketing power?

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As cattle producers, we spend much of the year preparing for the day calves will leave our ranch.

Most income in a cow-calf operation is derived from the sale of feeder calves, and proper planning helps make the most of this opportunity. Feeder-calf marketing may still be months away for your operation, but now is the time to plan your health program and identify the best marketing strategy.

Moving calves from the ranch is often compared to sending children to school. In both instances changes in nutrition, social structure, environment and disease challenge often occur. Several procedures, including minimizing stress and building immunity, can help minimize problems during the transition.

Prepare for transition

Stress plays a major role in the calf's ability to respond to disease challenges. Our goal is to minimize the stress, so any procedures we perform prior to the day of weaning will allow the calf to be better prepared. Surgical procedures such as castration and dehorning have less negative effect when performed early in life. My preference is to perform them when the calf is as young as possible.

Several methods exist to ease the postweaning transition, including weaning on the farm, using low-stress (or fenceline) weaning methods, and providing exposure to the new ration and water sources.

If you are planning to wean on the

farm, now is a good time to research the methods that will work best in your operation. Fenceline weaning allows the calves and dams to have visual, but not physical, contact and keeps the calves in a familiar environment for a short period of time. This method can work well, but it may require some modifications to your current facilities.

Weaning prior to shipment is a part of many preconditioning programs and allows calves to transition to the next production phase while in a familiar environment. Weaning prior to exposure to new calves or disease challenges is one of the key components to keeping calves healthy in the next stage of life.

Building immunity

Calves receive passive immunity for the first five to seven months of their life from the colostrum, or first milk, from their dam. As this immunity decreases, the calf begins to build active immunity to some pathogens.

However, when calves enter the next production phase, they will likely be exposed to new disease-causing agents they have not encountered on their ranch of origin. One of the best ways to prepare for this challenge is creating a sound vaccination program to generate immunity prior to disease exposure.

The body does not build immunity overnight, and vaccination prior to pathogen exposure provides the best chance of success.

Operations vary in production practices, regions of the country, and disease challenges the cattle will face. Therefore, there is no single vaccination program that is optimal for

all. Now is a good time to have a conversation with your veterinarian about the best plan for vaccinations for your calves and plan the timing of administration.

Now is also a good time to consider your potential marketing options. If the calves will enter a preconditioning program, make sure your plan includes all program requirements. Participating in value-added preconditioning programs can be beneficial both for calf health and capturing more value at sale of feeder calves.

Who has the power?

One of the frequent questions I receive related to preconditioning programs is, "Will I get paid for the additional investment in my calves?" This is a great question and emphasizes the importance of planning the marketing strategy to match the needs of your farm.

By vaccinating, using low-stress weaning and transitioning the calves to their new ration, you have added value to the calves by decreasing their disease risk. Added value is only realized when the calves are marketed in a system to capture a portion of this value. Evaluate your available marketing strategies to determine what works best for your situation and in your area.

Back to the question of marketing power in the cattle market: I believe this could go to either the buyer or the seller. Understanding the expected health and growth performance of the calves provides information that can be valuable to both buyer and seller. If the cow-calf operation has preconditioned the calves, this needs to be documented in a way that can be transferred to the buyer, and the calves need to be sold in a system that allows capture of that additional value.

The cow-calf producer has the

opportunity to properly prepare calves for postweaning, but this needs to be coupled with the appropriate marketing strategy to capitalize on this investment.

Conclusions

After 18 months of work from the breeding season to a weaned calf crop, we want to be sure to finish well with appropriate feeder-calf marketing. Managers of cow-calf operations have an opportunity to prepare calves for the next production phase by providing the nutrition, immunity and wellness management to minimize future health problems. The postweaning phase is also a time when cattle have the chance to fully express their genetic potential, and learning calf performance can influence future breeding decisions.

Preparing calves for the next production phase is important, but it needs to be coupled with a mechanism to transfer this information to the next owner in order to capture value from these procedures.

Cow-calf operators should spend time trying to understand factors important to buyers and work to provide documentation of these factors, while providing calves at the right time in the right system.

Marketing power is based on information. Tracking what has been done to your calves and when allows you to select the correct marketing avenues. |

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular *Angus Beef Bulletin* column devoted to the care and well-being of the herd. Author Brad White is on faculty at Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and serves as director of the Beef Cattle Institute. To learn more on this and other beef herd health topics, tune in to the weekly Beef Cattle Institute *Cattle Chat* podcast available on iTunes, GooglePlay or directly from KSUBCI.org.

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