

# Health & Husbandry

## Tips for bringing home new replacements.

by Brad White, Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute



Bringing home a new tool or piece of equipment to the ranch is always exciting. You have spent

time evaluating options to pick just the right one, and now you get to use it to achieve your goals.

Purchasing bred replacement heifers is similar. A lot of research goes into finding the correct ones and bringing them home. We want to get heifers off to a running start by managing their transition to the ranch, ensuring preventative health care is up to date and preparing them for long-term success in the herd.

### Transitioning bred heifers to the herd

Introducing outside animals to the herd should involve a transition plan to allow adjustment of animals to the environment and to avoid potential health issues. This transition is especially important with bred heifers, as we want to prevent health issues in both new arrivals and the base herd.

One component of the transition plan should be a quarantine period. Many viral and bacterial agents that cause abortion in cattle are primarily transmitted by nose-to-nose or oral contact among cattle. Our quarantine facility should be designed to prevent nose-to-nose contact between the newly arrived bred heifers and the base herd.

Our goal is to allow time for transient diseases the heifers may

have recently encountered to pass and avoid shedding pathogens to the base herd. In most cases, two to three weeks is an adequate quarantine period.

During this time cattle should be observed for signs of illness. If sickness is identified in the newly arrived cattle, the quarantine period should be extended. This period also allows heifers to adjust to new feed rations and water sources.

While the quarantine period will help avoid problems from transient disease-causing agents, there are a few important disease exceptions that can not be avoided through quarantine. For these diseases, work with your veterinarian to determine if diagnostic testing is a potential screening tool to avoid bringing specific pathogens into your herd.

When considering testing for a specific disease agent prior to introduction, it is important to know the current status of both the base herd and the local area. One of the best tools to avoid bringing in diseases is to work with the heifer source to ensure the herd of origin was free of potential disease concerns.

### Preventative health care for bred heifers

Bred replacement heifers are the future of the herd, and managing preventative health care during their pregnancy is critical. Ideally, heifers will come with a vaccination record, and additional vaccinations can build on existing immunity. If heifers do not come with a vaccination history, we will want to build a program to generate immunity

prior to base herd introduction.

Vaccinations to consider in heifers include viral [infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) and bovine viral diarrhea (BVD)] and bacterial (leptospirosis) agents that are associated with abortion. Any vaccine given to pregnant animals should be given in accordance with label directions. Work with your veterinarian to select the most appropriate vaccine strategy for your herd.

In addition to vaccines, a parasite control program may be instituted upon arrival. If new arrivals have not previously been dewormed or there is no history of deworming, arrival may be an ideal time to institute a parasite-control program.

Most gastrointestinal parasites of concern in cattle require grass

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[PHOTO BY SHAUNA HERMEL]

and grazing as part of their life cycle to reproduce and reinfect cattle. If the quarantine period is done in a drylot situation, cattle can be dewormed at arrival and any shedding of parasite eggs will occur in the drylot prior to exposing the base herd.

### Long-term success

Long-term success for a replacement heifer is dependent on getting her bred back in a timely manner for her second calf. Heifers naturally have a longer postpartum period (about 90-100 days) compared to mature, multiparous cows (50-70 days). The difference in postpartum periods is based on recuperation time following calving and can't be shortened very much. We want heifers to calve before the cows, allowing ample time for breeding back.

While we can not effectively decrease the postpartum interval in heifers, we can inadvertently lengthen the period of time before rebreeding. One frequent way this occurs is due to nutritional management.

Heifers are at a different production stage relative to cows, and after calving they are continuing to grow in addition to raising a calf. The target weight for heifers at first calving is 80%-85% of their mature body weight.

While target weight is important, another important metric is body condition score (BCS). Heifers will lose weight after calving, and we want heifers to calve at a BCS of 6 (out of 9) to increase the likelihood they will breed back in a timely manner.

Soon after arrival is the best time to begin the nutritional plan to be sure that heifers meet our targets of 80%-85% of mature body weight and a BCS of 6 at calving.

Sometimes bred heifers purchased from a sale will be fleshy. If they lose weight during the transition to the new operation, it can be challenging to put that weight back on them in a timely fashion. Planning a nutrition program to keep heifers in a positive energy and protein balance throughout the period between arrival and calving will make achieving the targets more likely.

### Conclusions

Purchasing bred replacement heifers is a great way to expand the genetics of your herd while finding heifers that will calve prior

to the cows and help tighten the calving season. A transition plan to manage the health of both the heifers and the base herd is important. This transition period should include a quarantine period and may involve some diagnostic testing.

Heifers are the future of the herd, and managing their preventative health program during this adjustment period is critical. Long-term success hinges on rebreeding after the first calving, which means we want heifers to be in good body condition at calving. **ABB**

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Editor's note: 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 [www.ksubci.org](http://www.ksubci.org).