

# Here's to Their Health

**Don't let health problems sacrifice quality of end product.**

Story & photo by  
**STEVE SUTHER**

Calf born in a blizzard? Deduct a little potential. Scours? There goes some of next year's efficiency and grade status. Drought? Stress at weaning? Respiratory disease? Inadequate nutrition? Forget about genetics, this calf has very little chance of a profitable feedlot stay or of winning *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand market premiums.

"We don't know how much health and management problems as a calf affect the growth efficiency of that animal throughout life and the final product," says University of Missouri (MU) veterinarian Bob Larson. "But many in the cattle and veterinary industry recognize negative effects." The extent most likely varies by the length, severity and cause of the disease or "management insult," he adds.

Minimizing stress on the farm takes a holistic approach to calving,

nutrition, housing and health, Larson says. Among the first considerations are colostrum intake, sanitation and disease avoidance.

Sam Rice, commercial Angus producer near Athol, Kan., had heard those things, but the message hit home when he began finishing



his 1999 calves at Hays Feeders LLC near Hays, Kan. "I saw how important health is, even the health of the baby calf when it starts out," Rice says. "If it has a tough time because of

weather or anything else, it just won't do as well as the others."

Rice has detailed records that correlate the poorest feedlot performance and carcass values with calves that had severe scours or missed colostrum because of a storm. "We see the difference," he says.

At weaning, Larson warns, don't stack castration and trucking on top of separation anxiety (castration should be done by 3 months of age if possible), and pay attention to facilities.

You can wean into a drylot or pasture, but to safeguard health and profit potential, they need to gain well. "Stress can be reduced by minimizing the amount of mud and dust that cattle have to experience," Larson says. "Calves should receive adequate energy, protein and mineral so that skeletal and muscle growth and immune function are all optimized — this may require early weaning if forage quality or quantity decreases because of drought or other problems."

Vaccination to pre-expose cattle to the disease agents they are likely to encounter helps decrease the occurrence and severity of disease, he notes. "Increased communication and cooperation between all segments will improve animal health, birth-to-slaughter growth efficiency and, likely, product quality."

## Progress report

Hays Feeders Assistant Manager Kendall Hopp says Rice is a great feeding partner because he tries to track down any problems and works on long-term goals with the feedlot. "We don't dictate a health program, but he tells us what vaccines the cattle have had, if they have been dewormed and drylotted, and on what ration."

Despite the cooperation, beef production always has a few unsolved mysteries. Rice generally feeds two pens, and the cattle arrive weighing 750-800 pounds (lb.), after a backgrounding phase where they gain 2.5 lb. per day. It has worked well, resulting in an average greater than 80% Choice and 25%-35% CAB — except for one pen in 2002, which Rice recalls as "a real train wreck."

"We had everybody working on it, trying to understand what happened," Rice says. "Nobody came up with a reason, but I did find out it can happen." That added to his feeding education. "I thought once I had fed two or three pens of cattle and knew what my genetics were, then it would be a pretty sure thing from then on," he says. "This changed my mind, but I stuck with it, and we haven't had the problem since."

The less one knows about feedlot cattle, the more the risk, but whole regions seem to encounter shifts in grading ability from year to year. "One time, we got in virtually the same cattle that went 60% Choice the previous year, and they were 30% Choice with Y-4s [Yield Grade (YG) 4s]," Hopp says. "It can be humbling," and even more so with calves.

Hays Feeders is a division of Pratt Feeders LLC, where the Lee Ranch, Coats, Kan., feeds several hundred calves each year. "They have been some of the best-doing, most consistent cattle on the U.S.

Premium Beef grid," says Pratt manager Jerry Bohn. "If we've had a struggle, it's been in the animal health area."

Nathan Lee says they used to give bovine respiratory disease (BRD) vaccines three weeks preweaning, but they had to quit since cows went to more remote, rented pastures. "We invest more dollars per head when we do vaccinate at branding, weaning and three weeks postweaning," he says.

"They get another booster when they arrive," Bohn says. "We had challenges for a year or two. Calves that have never been off the ranch can be a little naive, but coordination with the Lees has really helped." Among the lessons learned from feedback: Use modified-live virus (MLV) BRD vaccines.

"We also quit weaning in dirt lots," Lee says. "They stand for one night and bawl, then they are out to grass with a good five-wire fence. Last year we had close to 800 calves and pulled in maybe five for treatment, but I don't think we needed to. It's a lot better."

"In the past, they inhaled so much dirt that it was a respiratory challenge," he explains, "and they got pinkeye. Turning them out on pasture saves a lot of labor in feeding and managing."

Bohn says calves treated at home or in the feedlot are tracked both ways. "How did they grade? Did they have problems at home? There was a pretty clear link between death loss in the feedlot and trouble at home," he says. "Yes, those are the ones that got behind the eight ball," Lee says.

Of 1,970 Lee Ranch calves at Pratt Feeders from 1998 through 2003, the running average on final grade is 87% Choice or better with near 40% CAB acceptance and 43% YG 1s and 2s.

## Good health for good performance

"In recent years, a lot of people in the industry say cattle performance is going up but health is going down," says Sam Hands, manager of Triangle H Grain and Cattle Co., Garden City, Kan. "They say we're pushing cattle too hard for their health status. If it's true, I think it's because cattle are more youthful coming into the lots now."

During the last 10 years, calves have taken over an increasing share of feedlot inventories, Hands says. "Some is the result of genetics, some is production efficiency design — just look at how we produce more pounds of beef with the fewest cows we've ever had. We don't wean a 350-425-pound calf today; it's 500 or 600 pounds, big enough to go right into the feedyard. You can't beat the young cattle for production efficiency, but health is more of a concern."



By sharing information, Jerry Bohn (right), manager of Pratt Feeders LLC, and Nathan Lee, Lee Ranch, have developed a better vaccination protocol to keep calves healthy.

To stay in a comfort zone, Hands recommends vaccinations and 45- to 60-day preconditioning on grass, if possible. "Health is our top issue, but it includes age, background, weaned status, nutrition and degree of drought stress," he says. "If they don't start right, take to the feedbunk and get consumption going, we're going to have problems. And if drought or mineral deficiencies limit their response to vaccines, a lot of our efforts might go in vain."

Mark Sebranek, manager of Irsik & Doll Feedyard, Garden City, Kan., tries to simplify health program coordination. Working with quality assurance (QA) manager Jerry Jackson, the yard sets up a "portfolio" on every known-source pen of cattle. "We know a lot of customers won't change, so we try to adjust our health program to fit theirs," Sebranek says. "We ask for all their vaccine, treatment and nutrition information so we can match up."

"Jerry sets up our vaccination programs to fill in the gaps, and if an animal needs to be treated, he can use a different antibiotic than what was used at home," Sebranek adds. Like Bohn, he is wary of naïve calves. A Missouri customer used to add sale barn cattle to his high-quality Angus to fill out pens, but he stopped a couple of years

## Bawlin' babies

If any major feedlot is associated with "bawling calves," it's the birthplace of the strategic alliances movement. The 38,000-head capacity Decatur County Feed Yard (DCFY), Oberlin, Kan., takes in 20,000 or more weaning calves each year. Now Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed, DCFY looks for common ground between profit and carcass quality.

"We naturally have mostly calves because of our retained ownership focus," says Dan Dorn, who heads up supply development for the company. The calves are very young because "we encourage them to chase the spring markets," he adds.

Not looking for trouble, Dorn advises customers to wean at home if, and only if, they have the facilities and management. "If they don't have both, they will create a bunch of chronics, and we would prefer to take them bawling."

The feedlot expects complete health records with each load and promptly begins a paper trail on each calf. Cooperation is essential, Dorn says. If calves will be weaned at home, he prefers August to September separation. "Send me a weaned calf by mid-October,

and we will shoot for harvest in late March to early April," he says.

Vaccinations for blackleg and bovine respiratory disease (BRD) are recommended at branding, another round before weaning and again at weaning. Of the 20,000 head weaned at the feedlot last year, 1.1% died; the year before death loss on 23,000 head was 0.9%. Morbidity, or sickness, varies, from a low of 15% to as high as 50% or 60%, but averaging 25%.

Dorn realizes those higher levels of morbidity harm potential to gain and grade, but in most cases there is no alternative. "We can't try to force them to wean at home — we have customers who are great cow-calf ranchers and great herdsmen, but put them in charge of weaned calves and there will be trouble."

As earlier weaning becomes popular, colostrum immunity may help fight morbidity at the feedlot. Dorn hopes so. "With the long-term drought, we will see a lot of calves weaned at 90 to 100 days this year."

ago to focus on his own genetics. Respiratory disease soon became a problem; the sale barn cattle had been passing along immunity that the ranch calves were no longer getting. The ranch is working with

the feedlot to find the best solution.

Looking at so many variables on health and age differences, Sebranek echoes Hopp: "We are at the tip of the iceberg in figuring these things

out." Cooperation and communication are the tools that will continue to get at what lies beneath.

