

Should You Precondition Those Calves?

Consider using a management tool that has the most positive effect on an animal's health.

by **BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON**,
field editor

Beef producers aren't looking at the same high calf prices as a couple of years ago, but that doesn't mean producers shouldn't precondition their calves. Not only can preconditioning push up profits, it increasingly is seen as one of the best ways to enhance animal health and welfare.

"Our industry is at a tipping point when it comes to animal welfare, judicious antibiotic use, environmental stewardship



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

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"Preconditioning is the most conscientious choice producers can make for the betterment of their animals' health," adds Kathleen Brooks, University of Nebraska Extension livestock economics specialist. "Preconditioning programs promote calf growth, enhance immune function and minimize stress as calves move from the ranch to stocker or background operation and then to the feedlot. Combine preconditioning with sound weaning practices to best protect calves from infectious challenges they could encounter during their most delicate periods of early life."

Preconditioning profits

For preconditioning to pay, Brooks advises beef producers to put together specific programs for their own operations that are well-planned and managed. Consult with veterinarians and livestock marketing specialists, and weigh the costs and benefits of selling at a lighter weight vs. selling after a 45-day preconditioning period at a heavier weight with a price discount.

"Producers need to estimate costs and potential economic benefits associated with a program," she says. "Potential gains include any premium buyers are willing to pay for preconditioned calves and their added weight. Costs of the preconditioning program that need to be considered include handling, vaccinations, death loss and additional feed costs, as well as interest expense on borrowed money. The interest expense accounts for the opportunity cost of holding calves during the preconditioning period instead of selling at weaning."



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZOETIS

"Buyers will pay more when calves are less likely to get BRD. A good preconditioning program is about disease prevention," says Che Trejo, veterinarian with Zoetis beef technical services.

"I know people look at the premium for preconditioning, but the real profit center is getting more pounds of calf sold," says Thomson. "Vaccines don't work in stressed cattle. Stressed cattle don't eat. Cattle that don't eat and don't have a functioning immune system get sick."

Calves preconditioned ahead of shipping and commingling can help prevent issues that include bovine respiratory disease (BRD). Industry estimates show BRD accounts for annual losses of \$1 billion due to loss of production, increased labor expense, pharmaceutical costs and death.

Preconditioning results in better health and feedlot performance by reducing feedlot morbidity and mortality and lowering treatment costs, confirms Che Trejo, veterinarian with Zoetis beef technical services based in Idaho. "Buyers

will pay more when calves are less likely to get BRD. A good preconditioning program is about disease prevention," he says.

Zoetis' SelectVAC program provides producers with an online system for documenting their preconditioning efforts. Producers who use the respiratory vaccines like Bovi-Shield Gold® and Inforce™ 3 can use SelectVAC to create detailed barn cards listing vaccination and herd management records. Users can enter cattle immunization records, management information, breeding and genetic data, marketing location, intended sale date and more. Users also can check on enrollment status, refer to archived records and download digital copies of barn cards.

"In one commercial feedlot study, calves enrolled in SelectVAC demonstrated better performance than other preconditioning programs and were more than four times less likely to get sick or die than calves with an unverified health history," says Trejo. "Performance improvements included higher average daily gains, improved feed conversion and lower cost of gain. These differences increased preconditioned calf value for feedlot managers by \$5.25 per hundredweight (cwt.)."

Trejo says Zoetis' third-party verified data covering 1995-2012 showed a \$35-per-head premium for 500- to 600-weight calves. More recent data also showed a \$72-per-head average advantage for SelectVAC calves over non-enrolled calves for 2014 and 2015.

Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.

Implant calves during preconditioning

While preconditioning is about decreasing stress and providing preventative health care, Dan Thomson, Jones Professor of Production Medicine at the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine, says implant use during preconditioning improves feed efficiency and adds pounds.

Kip McMillan, cattle manager for Graham Angus Farm in Albany, Ga., uses implants in their commercial cattle operation.

"The extra gain from using implants translates to extra dollars. With an average \$2 investment per implant, we can see an added 25 pounds (lb.) in weight on cattle, which easily brings an extra \$50 per head," he says.

Trejo says multiple studies found calves weighed an average 19 lb. more at weaning with Synovex® use, meaning every truckload had 1,900 lb. more beef for a 20-to-1 return.

Calving on the Graham farm is January through early March. At 45 days old, calves are tagged, tattooed and banded; receive the first round of vaccinations; and are implanted with Synovex C. At weaning, steers are implanted with Synovex S to boost gain.

"When calves are on the cow and nursing, gaining 1.5 to 2 pounds a day, you can anticipate 15 to 22 pounds additional weaning weight on calves if they've been implanted," says Daniel Scruggs, managing veterinarian with Zoetis. "Calves receive a lower-dose implant because of their size. Like any implant, the magnitude of increased gain is improved with better nutrition."

Scruggs explains for nursing calves, implant performance is improved with better milking cows. Creep feed or other supplemental nutrition can improve implant performance in less optimally

milking cows, he adds, while calves not getting proper nutrition see reduced benefits.

Implants may affect issues such as marbling. Scruggs notes implants change the rate animals deposit muscle, making them more efficient in dietary protein utilization and transferring protein to muscle. Under some circumstances, implants can reduce intramuscular fat, although he says feedlots have learned to accommodate for the reduction by adjusting feed rations and target slaughter weights to account for potential grade impacts while preserving the gain advantage.

"Producers may see some pressure from buyers," says Scruggs. "But buyers will pay premiums for calves through SelectVAC, and that includes calves with implants."

