



Producing High-health Calves

Raising high-health calves increases profitability for cattlemen.

by Kayla M. Wilkins



Healthy calves that do not require treatment in a feedlot are significantly higher valued than those who do require treatment.

Producing high-health calves for the feedlot is a viable way for today's cattlemen to ensure maximum profitability on their operation. At National Cattlemen's Beef Association Cattlemen's College, Mark Hilton, DVM, Purdue University, says producers can significantly increase their bottom line by simply utilizing some precautionary management techniques. He says there is a preconceived notion as to what degree health is important in a feedlot situation, but it should be on the top of each producer's list.

"If that calf gets sick, the chances of profit on that calf are reduced severely," he explains.

Importance of feedlot health

Hilton recalls that in the 2004 Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) in Iowa, healthy calves that required no treatment for disease at the feedlot valued \$85.02 more than calves that required treatment once and \$201.16 more than calves that required two or more treatments. Ten years later, the numbers rose to \$119.92 and \$365.01. Hilton explains the numbers show a tremendous influence on calf value when relating health to overall profitability.

To produce calves that don't require treatment, Hilton says starting soon after the calf is conceived is crucial. He notes even though 75% of calf growth takes place in the last two months of gestation, it is still essential to focus on cow nutrition far before.

"Shorting that dam on nutrition when she is in her very earliest gestation can predispose a calf to bovine respiratory disease 18 months later," he explains.

Once the calf hits the ground, Hilton says it should be up and nursing within 30 minutes to achieve maximum calf vigor.

"The quicker the calf gets up to nurse, the more that calf is going to ingest colostrum and we know that it sets that calf up for good health later on," Hilton says.

Keep your calves healthy

Hilton emphasizes the importance of an optimum calving environment and says it is directly associated with overall productivity of the herd.

He says it is vital producers assure calves are hitting the ground during the time of year most conducive for health — usually beginning in late March, depending on the area's weather patterns. He compares the importance of caution in calving to that of humans being born. He explains no one would allow a newborn baby to stay in a bed previously used by another newborn who was potentially sick, so why expect that for cattle?

As a way to alleviate this issue and to promote health in newborn calves, he says producers should implement the Sandhills Calving System into their operation. He recommends consulting a veterinarian or trusted individual to aid in formulating a plan based upon this system that best fits the needs of the operation.

"If you have neonate calf disease, sit down with your veterinarian or someone that you feel very comfortable with and draw up some kind of a plan," he says, "because babies deserve to be born into a clean environment."

According to the system, all cows should be placed in a calving pen, and each week cows that have yet to calve should be

moved to a new calving pen. He explains that all the calves can be comingled again once the youngest has reached four weeks old. He has seen this arrangement work first hand with producers and says typically all calf disease problems are alleviated after implementation of the Sandhills Calving System.

In addition to suitable management techniques to promote good nutrition, Hilton stresses the significance of vaccinating calves on the front end to avoid more dollars going toward treatment should a calf get sick.

“A vaccine is an insurance policy,” he explains. “You are trying to insure against the fact that animals are going to be exposed to that disease and get sick, so vaccine is part of the toolbox as far as the health of the animal.”

Hilton explains that with 99% percent of cattle herds being open, producers are often creating a perfect environment for disease. With this problem in mind, he advises that producers consult a veterinarian to create a vaccination plan best fitting their area and operation.

He says, “This is not a cookie cutter industry.”

And because of that, producers need to be aware of their specific needs for their operation. He says for Illinois, he has found administering the first round of vaccines in June and then following up with the next round at weaning has been most effective and kept stress low.

Marketing

Hilton says that in the days leading up to calves entering the feedlot, preconditioning is another key piece in receiving maximum value.

“If you have put all the effort into his genetics, and his health, and low stress cattle and everything else, you deserve to get that little bit of extra on that calf,” he says.

Hilton recalls that the Indiana Beef Herd Preconditioning study that spanned from 1999 to 2009, found that each year over the duration of the study, the producer turned more profit with preconditioned calves.

He says the key point to aid producers in success is remembering that pounds and feed efficiency pay when sale time comes around. By feeding calves an additional 45 days post-weaning, producers are only increasing their profits.



The environment in which a calf is born has direct influence on the profitability potential of the calf later.

Research conducted by Iowa State University found that if calves aren't weaned prior to coming to the feedlot, they are 3.4% more likely to get sick. Additionally, if only killed vaccines are used, but not the modified live vaccines (MLV), then calves are 2.2% more likely to get sick.

In another study done by Oklahoma State University, it was found that calves coming into the feedlot that have been weaned for at least 45 days are the lowest risk for the feedlot buyer. He explains that although the price is higher when purchasing preconditioned

calves, buyers are actually saving since there is less antibiotic use, improved beef quality assurance, decreased labor and improved carcass quality.

Hilton says the big idea is that more work on the front end in producing calves ultimately results in less work later and a bigger check in the bank.

“Our job is to develop those cattle to their fullest potential,” he says. “We should be so proud of those cattle that in their ear tag is our name, our cell phone number and e-mail address.” **HW**

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Preconditioning calves for the feedlot is a key piece when aiming for maximum profitability.