



Calf Preconditioning



Improves Health and Earns Producers a Much-Deserved Bonus



George Pollock (left) keeps his calves healthy and gaining by following the Merial SureHealth Calf Preconditioning Program. He markets his calves at special SureHealth sales hosted by Brent Lowderman at Carthage Livestock, Carthage, Ill. The sales attract buyers who recognize the value of a veterinary-certified preconditioning program and are willing to pay a premium for health-certified calves.

Raising cattle isn't a 9-to-5 job. There is no overtime pay, no Christmas bonuses and no paid vacation. Producers have to create their own perks. One way they can earn an extra bonus on sale day — and before — is to follow a veterinarian-certified preconditioning program.

"Following a proven, veterinarian-certified preconditioning program pays throughout the production cycle," says Van Ricketts, Merial director of corporate accounts. "The health protocols of a good program help ensure that livestock are healthy and producing to their genetic potential throughout their lives — and buyers are willing to pay extra for that peace of mind."

Producer George Pollock, Rushville, Ill., has known the value of preconditioning for years. He owns a 130-head cow-calf operation and crosses Angus females with Hereford bulls to produce desirable black baldie calves. He weans and backgrounds his own calves, selling them as 600- to 800-lb. yearlings. Because he retains ownership through the stocker phase, establishing good health post-weaning is important to his operation.

"We've always preconditioned our calves. A good vaccination and health-care program is just good business," Pollock says.

Ricketts agrees. He says a solid preconditioning program that includes vaccination, parasite control and other good management practices helps prevent illness and keeps calves gaining, especially through the stress of weaning.

When the Merial® SureHealth® Calf Preconditioning Program was developed, Pollock saw an opportunity to be rewarded for practices he was already following. The program includes parasite control with an Ivomec® (ivermectin)



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brand product, two rounds of vaccinations, a Pasteurella vaccination with Respishield® HM, a 45-day weaning period, and other best management practices, such as castration and dehorning. The program is the only nationwide program that requires veterinary certification.

"I was doing everything required by the program except filling out the paperwork and putting in the ear tag," Pollock says. "Registering the calves under the SureHealth Program earns me at least \$0.05 per lb. extra, which figures out to \$30 to \$40 more per head."

Marketing his calves is a breeze thanks to specialty sales in his area. Pollock sells his calves at SureHealth sales hosted

by Carthage Livestock Inc., Carthage, Ill.

"The sales bring in outside buyers who may not otherwise come to our area," Pollock says. "They like the assurance that the cattle are weaned, broke to the bunk and healthy. And the 21-day limited health warranty is a big draw. Buyers have reported back to me that my calves are healthy at arrival and that they do well in the feedyard."

Carthage Livestock holds six Merial SureHealth Calf Preconditioning Program sales annually.

"The calves are easy for us to market," says Brent Lowderman, managing partner of Carthage Livestock. "They're weaned, certified to have had all of their vaccinations and are backed by a health warranty. That's very appealing to buyers, and they will pay extra for those calves."

Although preconditioning should yield healthier calves, not all preconditioning programs are equal. An Iowa State University Extension analysis from more than 20,000 lots of cattle at 105 sales found that third-party certification

Lowderman likes to see his customers top the market, so he further specializes his sales by holding breed-specific SureHealth sales. He's had certified Angus sales and hosted his first certified Hereford SureHealth sale in 2007.

"My goal with the Hereford sale is to help producers who have 25 to 30 calves," Lowderman says. "Those calves would take a hit in a general sale because they're not the majority. At our Hereford sale, we can attract buyers that are looking for Hereford cattle, and they can put together a semitrailer load of weaned, health-certified Hereford calves."

Lowderman's family also raises registered Herefords and puts all calves through the SureHealth Program.

"When I was growing up, we always had some sick cattle," Lowderman recalls. "Now that we follow the SureHealth Program and wean at least 45 days before selling, we don't have any problems with them. We put every calf through the program, including our replacement heifers, because it's not just about marketing, it's about following good health protocols."

Vaccination and parasite control are important, but Lowderman also sees benefits in the management protocols.

"The weaning requirement of the program is a major benefit. Weaned calves have already been through stress. They'll go straight to eating and have fewer illness problems and fewer pulls," Lowderman says.

It is those benefits that keep buyers coming back for more and create significant perks for the producers that bring their cattle to the Carthage SureHealth sales.

"We have one buyer who comes every year to one of our SureHealth sales," Lowderman recalls. "He reported back that he never had to put a needle to the calves that he bought last year, and that has value. We'll see him back year after year."

For more information on preconditioning and other value-added practices, visit www.surehealth.com. **HW**

of preconditioning claims receives a significantly — both statistically and economically — higher premium than similar, uncertified claims. Calves with certification claims that also were weaned at least 30 days received premiums of \$6.15 per hundredweight more than the price. Calves with uncertified claims of vaccinations and at least 30 days weaning received \$3.40 per hundredweight more than the base.

According to these findings, producers following a third-party certified preconditioning program — such as SureHealth — would earn an additional \$1,691 if selling 50 calves at 550 lb. An uncertified program would yield only a \$935 bonus, a difference of \$759.