

Don't Just Sit There, Precondition Your Calves

A preconditioning program is the right choice to realize profit in your cow-calf operation.

by Brent Meyer



My grandfather would often declare, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” He was emphasizing that one needed to make a choice, and that those choices have consequences — either good or bad. As both a beef producer and a veterinarian, one of my passions is promoting the practice of preparing calves for the next phase of production. My aim herein is to demonstrate the value of preconditioning and thereby motivate you to make the right choice and invest in your calves.

At the recent Bovine Respiratory Disease Symposium held by the Academy of Veterinary Consultants, several feedlot managers discussed feeder calf purchasing decisions. Given a choice, the managers preferred to purchase preconditioned calves at a higher premium. These same managers would not bid on non-preconditioned calves because of the risks they posed.

The goal of preconditioning is to minimize the magnitude and number of concurrent stressors faced by calves. When management procedures are modified to achieve the preceding, morbidity and mortality are lower. Calves that have been dewormed, have received both primary and booster vaccinations, and have been weaned at least 45 days will be well prepared for the next phase of production.

Do not let preconditioning nomenclature confuse you. There are a myriad of named preconditioning programs such as the Iowa Green/Gold Tag program and the Merck PrimeVAC program. Programs are generally grouped into the following classifications: VAC24, VAC34, VAC45, and VAC PRECON. The VAC24 program is considered the baseline, signifying calves received both a bovine

respiratory disease and clostridial vaccination at 3-4 months of age and nothing else. VAC34 denotes calves received vaccinations at 3-4 months of age and again 2-4 weeks pre-shipment. Neither VAC24 nor VAC34 require a weaning period. VAC45 requires a minimum of 45 days weaned plus vaccinations at 3-4 months with boosters. Finally, VAC PRECON requires a minimum of 60 days weaned, plus vaccinations at 3-4 months with boosters.

Superior livestock data

In 2019 Superior Livestock calf sales data, the following variables significantly affected calf price: weight, number of head in lot, weight variation within lot, sex, frame/flesh, polled vs. horned, breed, vaccination program and BQA certification of the farm of origin. The data comprised 6,942 lots of calves with an average weight of 575 pounds (range=250 to 800) sold at an average price of \$154 per hundredweight (cwt.). Nationwide, compared to VAC24 (baseline), the preconditioning programs below resulted in the following premiums:

VAC34 + \$2.79/cwt.

VAC45 +\$5.97/cwt.

VAC60 +\$6.16/cwt.

VAC PRECON +\$7.20/cwt.

Within the upper plains region, calves without a VAC program suffered a \$3.97/cwt. discount. A producer in the upper plains forfeited \$22.82 per head on a 575-pound calf compared to a baseline VAC24 calf at the same weight. Conversely, if a producer opted for the VAC60 program, then the premium per head (now a 700-pound calf) over a VAC24 calf was \$30 per head — and this includes subtracting veterinary health costs and feed costs if

fed 60 days gaining 2 pounds per day. That is nearly a \$50 per head difference!

This scenario will vary depending on how cattle are fed post weaning, but the take-home message is preconditioning calves pays back a premium. The Superior data also showed implanted calves were not discounted, and non-implanted calves did not receive a premium. This is further evidence to support the use of nursing-calf implants to increase weaning value.

Low-stress weaning

Weaning is viewed as one of the most, if not the most, significant stressors in the life of a calf. The goal of low-stress weaning is to have calves in both a positive immunological and nutritional state to withstand the stress of weaning. Evidence suggests low-stress weaning dramatically improves the health and wellbeing of calves. Fenceline weaning and anti-suckling devices are viable options to reduce stress on calves and to improve responses to vaccination.

Regarding fenceline weaning, consider penning up the calves and cows in an area for several days, or until the calves find the water and feed sources. Then remove the cows from the area while still allowing nose-to-nose contact. The calves will have minimal issues staying on feed and water since they are familiar with the environment and the cow is nearby. Using anti-suckling devices is another option. Anti-suckling devices prevent calves from nursing while allowing the pairs to stay together. Following installation of the device, the calf stays with the dam for a period of up to 14 days, then the device is removed after weaning.

The importance of consistent feed intake in the immediate

post-weaning period toward maintenance of health cannot be overstated. Work with your nutritionist to avoid erratic feed intakes. A common proven practice is limit feeding, where calves are fed 2.2% of their body weight daily for 2-3 weeks. This program will keep calves aggressive at the bunk while generally eliminating erratic feed intakes and digestive upsets.

Deworming

Recent evidence suggests the injectable and pour-on products for deworming cattle are losing effectiveness. Resistance issues are severe and commonplace. Allowing the worm burden to remain after weaning will reduce response to vaccination and increase sickness rates. Deworm calves shortly before or at weaning with an efficacious product. Producers should strongly consider testing fecal samples 14 days following deworming to assess the dewormer’s effectiveness.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: preconditioning pays. However, no producer will get paid for their preconditioning efforts unless it is effectively communicated to buyers, such as with a certificate from Merck Animal Health’s PrimeVAC program. The choice is yours. Will you sit there and do nothing for no reward, or will you take those extra steps and both realize more profit from your cow-calf operation and enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that you did the right thing for the calves? Make the right choice: choose preconditioning. **HW**

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