

Preconditioning - Part of a Herd Health Program

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Every year cattle feeders in the United States have millions of feeder calves and yearlings going into their feedlots. Feeder calf procurement will be extremely important during the next few years in that with low feed grain costs and tremendously increased value of all cattle, cattle feeders will need to exercise great care in selecting feeders because feeders will be in short supply and the demand will be greater.

Processing the feeder calf for its entry into feedlots is already receiving considerable interest among cattlemen. Several states are programming sales of only processed calves in feeder cattle sales. This is an attempt to market feeder calves straight from the farm that are properly processed. The generally accepted term for the program is "preconditioning."

The Veterinary Extension Service programmed a preconditioning program in Iowa with the Iowa Veterinary Medical Association and the Iowa Cattlemen's Association which has been available for Iowa cattlemen for the last ten years and over 600,000 calves are processed through this program annually. The program involves certifying that the calves have been weaned, vaccinated, treated for grubs, wormed and identified with a green tag. A certificate accompanies the calf. Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, South Dakota and North Dakota also have programs underway.

Cattlemen in many states are asking questions pertaining to procedures involved in the program. The program includes:

(a) *Weaning*: The most serious stress on a calf is weaning. It is recommended that the calves be weaned at least 30 days prior to sale. Weaning is the most important part of the program. A weaned calf started on feed adjusts to movement and adaptation to the feedlot with less shrink and susceptibility to disease. Weaning is more important than all of the other recommended procedures. A calf will shrink 3-5% when weaned but will recoup that shrink in 10-15 days. A calf properly fed and handled will gain 20 to 60 lbs. during the 30-day weaning period. Calves may be weaned at five months of age particularly if pastures are short and the mother cows are not milking well. Leaving the calf on the cow until winter season is not always good economy. Cow-calf producers are finding that calves frequently sicken on the farm when weaned, so caution must be exercised

in the method of weaning.

(b) *Vaccination*: Calves vaccinated under three months of age should be revaccinated at the weaning period. Vaccination against IBR, PI3, pasteurella, *Hemophilus somnus*, and the clostridial group is recommended. This can be done three weeks prior to weaning or shortly after weaning. The pasteurella and *Hemophilus somnus* vaccinations should be repeated two to three weeks later. BVD is optional in most preconditioning programs, although in some areas, close to 100% are vaccinated.

(c) *Worming and Grub Treatment*: All calves should be wormed and grubbed. Grub treatment can start at different times in different states depending upon the heel fly season. Over 50% of all calves are wormed. The economics of worming is rapidly being recognized by feeders.

(d) *Castration and Dehorning*: One of the evils of feeder calf procurement is purchasing freshly castrated animals or those recently dehorned. Calves can be castrated and implanted at one to two weeks of age. There is an undocumented opinion that a bull calf will weigh more at weaning than a steer. Yet castration frequently produces 20-25% shrink. Calves castrated and implanted will gain more than a bull calf. Freshly castrated calves offered for sale are a mark of poor cattle management. Implanting is recommended for calves nursing and/or going into the feedlot.

Cow-calf producers and cattle feeders need to work together on such programs. The 1½-2% death loss and loss due to sickness can be corrected if properly processed calves are available for the feeder. Processed, weaned calves usually gain enough to pay for the trouble of weaning and other recommended measures with weights of 20-60 lbs. being obtained during the weaning period.

Preconditioned calves have been demanding \$2.50 to \$3.00 more per 100 pounds than similar calves in the majority of sales. Calves of poor quality, even if preconditioned, do not demand this premium. Further, if the calves are of proper genetic background, the preconditioning period does not produce an "overdone" or excessive "fat" calf, but merely more muscle.

With present feed and veterinary product prices, the cow-calf producer will invest from \$5 to \$7 for the processing and \$15 to \$20 for feed during the 30-day

preparation period. When present prices of feeder calves and yearlings are evaluated, the 20-60 lbs. the calf will gain during this period and the premium received more than pays the cattleman for his efforts, plus the value of the pride he has for his product.

Regardless of whether it costs or pays, the image of the cattleman is at stake. He should be proud of his product and feeders will pay less for calves not prepared for their feedlots. In the long run, it will pay for the entire cattle industry. Cow-calf men and

feeders must work together.

Veterinarians have been extremely helpful in the development of the program in Iowa. Although the program is not a regulatory program, exactness in the preparation of the certificate is important in maintaining the credibility of the program. One veterinary practice in Iowa preconditions 15,000 to 20,000 calves annually.

Preconditioning is an essential part of herd health programs for the beef herd.