

Is Preconditioning Doomed to Fail? A Kentucky Order Buyer's Viewpoint

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. All of us have a common goal—healthy cattle. Cattle health is a number one prerogative at King Livestock Company. Our survival in the cattle order buying business is dependent on shipping healthy cattle and for them to remain healthy during their feeding period. Our customers are looking for fresh country cattle that can be shipped direct to the feedlots. It is almost impossible to purchase load lots of uniform calves in a state that has an average cow herd of 17 head. Therefore, preconditioned sales present to us the next best alternative—commingled calves that are uniform in quality, size and medical history. While this isn't as ideal as "one owner" load cattle, it is similar. In the past, when we shipped "put together cattle" out of sales, I lived in fear of our customers having health problems with their cattle, and they almost always did. We finally learned a better way to serve them. To ship any distance, we either buy fresh country cattle, preconditioned cattle or one owner cattle or we don't buy any! We have tried to establish a good reputation in shipping healthy cattle during the past 18 years. Preconditioning has been a valuable tool in helping us keep our calves healthy. We believe the program benefits calves much more than yearling cattle, but has some positive effect on yearlings as well.

What is Preconditioning? What does it mean?

I'm sure, even in this audience, there would be several definitions from us experienced professionals. For example, the first time I heard the name Geraldine Ferraro, I thought someone was referring to Flip Wilson's sports car.

What Does Preconditioning Mean to the Producer?

Some Producers have stated that their calves have had a blackleg shot, are eating shelled corn and are preconditioned. Some have stated that their calves are on full feed, have received all their shots and are preconditioned. Of course, there are good managers that are knowledgeable of the program—and are doing a good job—and know the true meaning of preconditioning.

What Does Preconditioning Mean to the Feedlot Operator?

When we mention CPH calves to some feedlot operators, they automatically think of fat or fleshy calves, because some people overfeed. Poor weighing conditions or full calves at time of weighing have plagued some feedlots. The

expanded rumens seem to have the capacity to carry excessive fills. Some feedlot buyers question the integrity of the program because of bad experiences in the past.

What Does Preconditioning Mean to the Grazing Operator?

A grass diet following a heavy grain ration puts the grazer at a disadvantage as far as good gains are concerned. Sometimes the CPH calves are too fleshy to go to grass. Also the size of the preconditioned calves are somewhat too heavy for the grazer.

Health is most important for the grazer, though, because his cattle will be running over a large area which presents more problems to get them up and treat them.

What Does Preconditioning Mean to the Order buyer?

CPH calves generally mean higher prices. We sometimes run into resistance from our customers because of the reputation of high prices within these sales. The CPH sales mean larger groups of uniform, good quality calves that are weaned and premedicated and ready to go to work. We have approximately 2400 consigned for our December sales in Hopkinsville. However, some of the CPH calves in this area have a reputation of being too fleshy. Some producers overfeed.

The appearance of CPH calves must be understood by the buyer. The larger belly due to the development of the rumen must be taken into consideration. Also, the dead hair look caused by the transition of a rich milk fed calf to a roughage fed weaned animal must be understood by the buyer. We then have an animal that doesn't look as good but performs better.

The calves in the CPH sales are likely to be from better managed herds with more quality. The poorer quality calves and smaller frame animals shouldn't be preconditioned to begin with. The lesser quality calves in these sales generally bring less than they would in the regular weekly auctions. The buyers attending these sales are looking for health and quality.

What Can We Do to Improve Preconditioning and Preconditioned Sales?

First, we must fully understand the program, the fundamentals and purpose of preconditioning. (Example)

1. Have enough numbers to allow truck load lots of 50,000# of similar cattle to be grouped together or

accumulated. Mixing CPH and non-CPH cattle make the program worthless.

2. Set up management programs in local areas to teach the producers how to have reputable preconditioned calves. The veterinarian or county agent may be instrumental in monitoring this type of program.

3. Keep the medication and shots given the calves updated with what is necessary, (example) along with implanting them where the feeder buyer will not need to work the calves any more when he receives them.

4. Keep integrity in the program by using the veterinarian to medicate and vaccinate the calves and keep everything "above board" and restrictive.

5. Be sure the certification slips go with the calves to inform the receiving veterinarian and feeder buyer of the calves' medical background.

6. Improve the weighing condition and eliminate the bad reputation of selling full calves.

7. Grade the sales properly and sell separately the fleshy calves or out calves.

8. All heifers should be guaranteed open to add reputation to the program.

9. Stop overfeeding the calves. Shorten the feeding time and go more to a growing ration. In my opinion, this is the largest single problem today. This affects health and performance and will eliminate preconditioning if not stopped!

10. Standardize preconditioning nationwide where all of us are working together for the same goal, giving the program the same meaning, with a good reputation throughout the country, where all of us can survive the Beef Industry and make it more profitable for everyone.

I have enjoyed speaking to you this afternoon. Thank you for your kind attention. Maybe we have covered a few areas that will lead to some discussion later and help improve the overall preconditioning concept.