



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Animal Health Section

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Preparing Calves for the Feedlot

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It has been shown that when poorly prepared calves are shipped to the feedlot they are nearly 20 times more likely to become ill compared to suitably managed and immunized calves. Specific preparation of calves for their feedlot experience is the best way to reduce the risk of a disease outbreak in the feedlot. When properly prepared, calves adapt quickly to feedlot rations, environmental stresses, and challenges to their immune system (e.g., infectious diseases).

In the cattle business, the extra costs avoided may be the only profit from your animals. For example, the average sick animal will shrink 10 to 20 percent and require 1 to 2 hours of labor. Information from the Rocky Mountain Ranch-to-Rail program indicates that one of the primary factors that impacts feedlot profitability is whether steers required treatment for health problems after being placed on feed. One time through the chute is considered equal to a 7-day feeding period. It is cheaper to prevent disease than to treat it.

For optimal reduction of feedlot disease risk, owners must direct their attention to the four areas that impact most on the calf's ability to perform and stay well. These include: (1) stress management, (2) resolving nutritional deficiencies (including minerals), (3) controlling parasite burdens, and (4) pre-immunization against feedlot diseases.

Economic return on investment should be taken into account. Failure to control all four areas of risk management will greatly increase the risk of disease and economic loss. For example, programs that rely on prevaccination alone and ignore nutritional deficiencies and/or stress management do not have the same economic and health benefits as programs that balance all four areas.

The cost of your program also must make economic sense for your operation. Some cow/calf units cannot effectively manage newly weaned calves. Arrangements should be made to move these calves into a backgrounding operation at weaning.

Management to Reduce Stress and Optimize Immune Response¹

The best programs are those that have the calves weaned and their immune systems well primed before shipping. Calves should be weaned at least 45 days before they are shipped. Studies have shown that at least 4 to 6 weeks may be needed to regain weight loss experienced at weaning time.

Management at Weaning

1. Calves should be eating some dry feed 2 to 4 weeks before weaning.
2. Vaccination procedures should be reviewed and implemented, if necessary. Specific suggestions follow.
3. Provide an adequate supply of fresh water.
4. Assess vitamin and mineral needs and resolve deficiencies.
5. Provide high-quality hay as the forage base.
6. Check feed and water consumption; both should increase during the weaning period.
7. **Dehorning and Castration**—The preferred time for these procedures is when calves are 1 to 3 months old. If that is not possible the next best time is 2 to 3 weeks before weaning.
8. Design rations targeting desired weight gains and cost of gain. Consult a nutritionist for best results.

Management at Marketing and Transportation

1. Calves should be weaned 4 to 6 weeks before shipment for expected recovery of weaning weight losses.
2. Avoid prolonged processing. It is crucial to get calves moving and delivered quickly.
3. Avoid crowding and bruising.
4. Avoid excessive working, sorting, etc.

¹Recommended in a joint effort between the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the American Association of Bovine Practitioners.