

Adding value to calves at weaning time

By Grant Crawford, University of Minnesota Beef Team

With Labor Day having passed and Autumn closing in, many cow/calf producers are getting ready for weaning of spring calves. This is the time of year when all of the hard work put into calving, pasture management, and keeping cows and calves healthy and nourished will hopefully result in the weaning and eventual selling of healthy and valuable calves. This is also the time of year when many cow/calf producers begin to explore the inexact science of determining what can be done to improve the value of their calves when it comes time for sale. Some of the common questions are: When should I wean, and by what method? What program should I use to vaccinate my calves? When and how should I market my calves?

To answer these questions, cow/calf producers should first determine two things: 1) What will my facilities allow? 2) What traits and qualities will bring the best return when I sell my calves? The first question will assist in determining what type of weaning method to utilize. The goal with weaning should be to put as little stress on calves as possible. Weaning methods such as fenceline weaning and pasture weaning allow for reduced stress compared to the traditional practice of completely separating calves from their dam and placing the calves in a drylot pen. Pasture weaning allows calves to remain on familiar pasture while moving cows to a different pasture. New Mexico State University research showed that pasture-weaned calves had greater average daily gains than drylot-weaned calves for the first three weeks after weaning. Over the next three weeks, the drylot calves did catch up and surpass the pasture-weaned calves in gains. When the performance of the calves was followed through the feedlot, average daily gains were not different, but health of the pasture weaned calves was much better than the drylot weaned calves and resulted in an overall net economic gain from pasture weaning compare with drylot weaning.

Through fenceline weaning, cows and their calves are simply separated by a fence, but are still allowed to see, hear, and smell one another. This method reduces the stress associated with transport, change in environment, and separation from the dam. For this method to work, fencing must be substantial enough to prevent calves from nursing and to keep the cow and calf separated. Heavy-duty fence such as woven wire is ideal, although traditional barbed wire with electric fence should be adequate. Research from the University of California showed that fenceline weaning calves for one week prior to total separation resulted in greater weight gains at both two and ten weeks after weaning than either traditional drylot weaning or pasture weaning.

If pasture space is not available for these weaning methods, and drylot weaning is the only option, it is important that adequate feed and water is available immediately upon calves entering the drylot. Drylot pens should be clean and well-drained. Because calves may not be accustomed to feed bunks and water troughs, these items should be placed perpendicular to fences so calves find them as they pace the perimeter of the pen. Water troughs should be allowed to run over for at least the first day after weaning to attract calves to water. Calves should be allowed 18-24 inches of bunk space/head, and one water space per approximately 40 calves should be adequate. Bunk and water trough height should be 18 inches or less, and dust should be minimized in the pen either by limiting the number of calves in a pen or watering down pens daily.

In answering the second question, cow/calf producers should put themselves in the shoes of a cattle feeder. With high feed and fuel prices, margins for cattle feeding are quite slim, and therefore cattle feeders are putting an even greater emphasis on finding value in calves than in years past. Basically, cattle feeders are looking for value and predictability. The value they are looking for is a calf or a group

of calves that will perform to their expectations while still being purchased at a price that will allow for a profit. The predictability aspect relates to bringing calves into a feedlot that will be healthy and start on feed immediately so that added costs of medical treatment and increased days on feed are not incurred. Because of this, cattle feeders put great emphasis on purchasing calves that are preconditioned. That is, calves that are weaned and trained to a bunk and water trough, and have also been through a solid vaccination program. Post-weaning preconditioning programs of at least 45 days are preferred by many feedlots. During this time calves are able to overcome the stress of weaning and become accustomed to feed bunks, fences, water troughs, humans, and other calves.

Vaccination programs, such as the “VAC-45” program that requires calves to be backgrounded for 45 days post-weaning and has specific requirements for vaccinations, dehorning, pre-weaning, and bunk feeding, return close to \$10/cwt more than non-preconditioned calves in Superior Livestock Auction sales. When this premium is coupled with the added weight that will be sold through the backgrounding program, it is often a worthwhile investment. However, the costs of these pre-conditioning programs should be continuously measured against the premium that is offered for these calves.

Finally, with high feed prices, feedlots are attempting to limit days on feed in the feedlot through purchase of heavier weight calves. Because of this, there is a demand for 800-900 pound calves, and this has resulted in prices for these heavier weight calves to be much closer to lighter weight calves than in years past. Therefore backgrounding calves to heavier weights may be a good decision to realize a greater return than selling lighter calves shortly after weaning. Drs. Ryon Walker and Grant Crawford from the University of Minnesota Beef Team recently provided recommendations on backgrounding calves on pasture and cornstalks, and these articles are available on our website at www.extension.umn.edu/beef.

If cow/calf producers have not already made plans for weaning, now is certainly the time to do so. These recommendations should help in realizing the greatest value for your calves. Additional resources such as the local veterinarian, auction barn managers, extension educators, and feedlot managers may also assist in determining what can be done to make this year's calf crop as great as it can be.