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Management strategies for calves pre and post – weaning that could improve quality of your beef cattle

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(BLUE SPRINGS, MO – January 5, 2012) Cow – calf producers, nutrition and management of calves pre and post – weaning influences incentives received when marketing your cattle. Proper nutrition and management programs follow a calf the rest of their life with improved performance. Based on improved performance, the back - grounding and feedlot sectors of the cattle industry pay a premium on cattle that have went through such programs.

Packers are interested in high quality beef carcasses because of public interest in high quality beef and are likely to pay incentives. Present day incentives for higher quality Prime and Choice beef carcasses are $29 and $17 per cwt., respectively, versus lower quality Select beef carcasses. Larry Corah, Vice President of Certified Angus Beef LLC, discussed at the Applied Reproductive Strategies in Beef Cattle Symposium that nutrition and management are important in producing a high quality beef carcass. The goal with pre and post – weaning strategies is to plan to decreases sickness and stress in the animal, which increases energy used towards growth and marbling deposition and improves animal quality grade at slaughter.

Calf weight, calf sale time and calf’s mother’s condition score should determine calf weaning time. Depending on feed resources, lactating cows may be approaching body condition score (BCS) 4 or less. Calves, at least 60 days old and nursing a cow in BCS 4 (identified by visible ribs and backbone) or less, should be considered for creep feeding (hand feeding or supplemented a corn based ration separately from the cows) or early weaning and placed on a preconditioning ration. This helps the cow return to optimum BCS 6 (identified by good smooth appearance throughout) before calving and provides the calf optimum nutrition for performance and promotion of marbling deposition. If cow condition is not affecting calf weaning time, then...
the calf should be weaned at approximately 45% of their finish weight or 550 to 600 pounds instead of the typical 205 days as milk nutrient profile may not be adequate for target performance and stimulation of marbling deposition at heavier calf weights. After weaning, the calf should be preconditioned at least 45 days prior to sale. This preconditioning period allows the calf to get over weaning stress, get use to a feed bunk and waterer. Some livestock marketing centers have special sales for preconditioned calves. Those calves average selling $5 to $6 per cwt. higher than calves not preconditioned.

Preconditioning diets include various components. One component is a supplement which should be corn based with corn and soybean byproducts. To reduce sickness and digestive problems add coccidiostat and ionophore to supplement. Vitamin and mineral levels in the supplement need to meet the calf’s requirements. Hand feed supplement once or twice daily and the calf should have access to high quality hay or pasture. Combination of the two components should meet the animal’s nutrient requirements for 2 to 2.5 pounds of ADG. High starch level is important at this time to stimulate marbling deposition which improves beef carcass quality grade at slaughtered. Creep feeding calves supplement until weaning aids in diet transition at weaning and improves marbling and beef carcass quality grade at slaughter. Clean water source is important during the preconditioning period so calves don’t get dehydrated and it cuts down on sickness.

Besides proper nutrition, proper vaccination is needed to decrease sickness in the calf. Vaccinate cow 3 to 6 weeks before calving to prevent calf scours. Vaccinate calf for IBR, PI – 3, BVD, BRSV, Pasteurella, Haemophilus Somnus, and Blackleg 7 – way pre – weaning. Treat calves for internal and external parasites pre – weaning. Heifers retained in the herd maybe vaccinated for brucellosis within 4 to 11 months of age by veterinarian. Vaccination programs vary between operations so consult a veterinarian in developing a program.

Besides a vaccination program, a calf processing program is important. Between birth and pre – weaning vaccinations, identify the calf in the form of tagging, tattoo or branding. This identification will follow the calf the rest of its life, aid in record keeping, which is useful in making management decisions that improve the performance and quality of the herd. Castrate bull calves as soon as possible after birth to minimize stress. Dehorn horned calves as early as possible with optimum time being at a month of age. Bulls and horned calves see discounts at sales because stocker and feedlot operators know cattle will perform better if these are taken care of early in life, before they reach their operation. Processing programs vary between operations so consult a veterinarian in developing a program.

Besides proper nutrition and management, calves need to be evaluated daily for sickness. Signs consist of lethargy, decreased intake, droopy ears, nasal discharge, and labored breathing. A calf exhibiting these signs needs to be evaluated and treated immediately. Cow – calf producers see the most incentives on their calves that have went through proper nutrition and management programs that reduce stress and sickness. Preconditioning sets the calves up for efficient use of energy towards growth and marbling deposition, leading to a higher quality beef product down the road. For more information on nutrition and management of calves contact your local University of Missouri Extension Livestock Specialist. Thank you for reading this article and I hope this is useful in your beef cattle operation.
For more information, contact specialist’s name, number, e-mail or visit your local Extension Center or extension.missouri.edu.

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