University of Wisconsin-Extension

Pre-Conditioning Program Considerations for Feeder Cattle

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An optimal pre-conditioning program for feeder calves includes both health and management practices to help prepare calves for transition to stocker/ backgrounder and/or feedlot environments. Pre-conditioning reduces stress on the calves, reducing health risks.

Research conducted across the country indicates that feeder cattle having been through quality pre-conditioning programs are less likely to get sick, which in turn leads to improved performance in the feedlot, and higher quality carcasses. Documenting the preconditioning program used serves as a value-added marketing tool. Several studies have shown that preconditioned calves sell at a premium to non-preconditioned calves especially when marketed through value added channels.

Ultimately it is the producers' choice as to what practices they implement in their pre-conditioning program. Veterinarians' and producers' marketing partners are good sources of information regarding health protocols and what buyers are demanding.

Following are nutritional and health practice considerations for pre-conditioning programs:

Nutritional Considerations for Pre-Conditioning

During the pre-conditioning time frame the target rate of gain should be 1.5 to 1.75 pounds per day. The goal is to have moderate gain, not to condition calves up onto a finishing ration. Gains much higher may result in fleshy calves at sale time and research has shown that fleshy calves are often discounted.

Feeding a balanced ration is critical to the overall health and performance of the calf. Calves respond better to vaccinations and other health treatments when fed rations balanced for energy, protein, macro- and micro-minerals and vitamins. Rations can be formulated using many different feedstuffs. Typical rations fed during weaning and pre-conditioning are high in forage. Points to consider regarding rations during weaning and preconditioning include:

- Often this time frame begins with a transition from being on pasture with the cows to being in dry lot area without cows and includes transition from grazing to harvested feeds in a bunk. Long stemmed soft hay of good or better quality is one of the best feeds to have for this transition. It is very similar to what they were eating in the pasture, fluffs up in the bunk so they can see it easier, and eating this helps keep the rumen working like it should.
- The cow can be used as a teacher. The feeds you intend to feed at and after weaning can be introduced to cow/calf pairs in a bunk. Calves learn there is good food in the bunk by watching the cows eat. This greatly helps reduce the transition time to the new feeds.
- Once calves are separated from the cows, nutrient dense feeds may need to be offered in addition to the long stemmed soft grass hay. Calves separated from the cows are spending more time pacing, trying to get back to the cows; because they are not eating and resting, it may also be necessary to provide a palatable corn and pellet complete feed until they settle down. This restless behavior typically lasts about a week.
- Once they settle down then they can be transitioned onto a lower cost ration for the duration of the pre-conditioning period.
- Test the forages and feeds and work with a nutritionist to balance the ration and make sure the minerals and vitamins are at sufficient levels.

Common requirements of high level pre-conditioning programs:

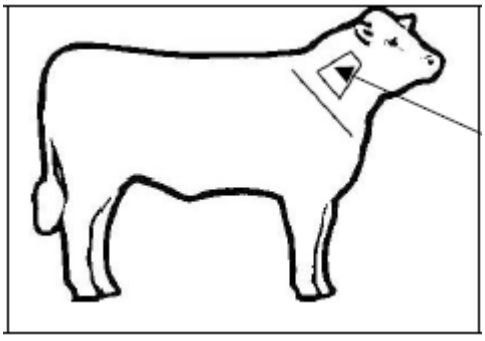
1. Owned by seller for at least 60 days (for stocker calves)
2. Weaned a minimum of 45 days
3. Bunk broke and broke to water tank or fountain
4. Vaccinations (all given in front of shoulder) per Beef Quality Assurance Guidelines

   a. IBR-BVD-PI3-BRSV -booster if label required; final dose must be MLV For IBR, BVD, PI3. -BRSV faction can be either MLV or killed.
   b. 7 way *Clostridia* -booster if label required, Subcutaneous product only
   c. Mannheimia/Pasteurella

5. Dewormed with product that kills inhibited Ostertagia given at time of weaning and or within 90 days of sale.
6. Treated with product that kills lice and grubs (grub control subject to time of year requirments)
7. Dehorned - all horn tissue including scurs should be removed and or burned
8. Castrated with any method (knife preferred) until 4 months of age. If over 4 months of age at time of castration, knife method Is strongly encouraged
9. All surgical procedures completed at least 30 days before sale and all surgical wounds healed
10. All vaccinations and boosters administered at least 14 days (21 days preferred) but no more than 90 days before sale of cattle
11. If implanted, give product name and date administered
12. Read and follow all product label directions.
13. All procedures done in accordance with Beef Quality Assurance Guidelines

B. Optional Procedures

1. Additional vaccines for
   A. *Brucella* (heifers only)
   B. *Haemophllus*
   C. *Leptospira*
   D. Pinkeye
2. Coccidiostat fed
3. Heifers aborted
4. Third party verification of procedures



Beef Quality Assurance Guidelines should be followed for all cattle management programs

- All injections must be administered in the neck region
- Subcutaneous (SQ) preferred
- Low-volume dose products preferred

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