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Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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Preconditioning Feeder Calves

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Each year more than a million quality feeder calves are sold in South Dakota. These sales contribute significantly to agricultural income in the state (the sale of cattle and calves together makes up 50% of total ag income).

Under the leadership of South Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) and Extension Service, an organized, certified feeder calf preconditioning program is available as an optional management tool for South Dakota cow-calf producers. The program is designed to assure the highest standards of quality, health, and performance when South Dakota feeder calves reach the feedlot.

In addition to the SDSU Extension Service, the BCIA certified preconditioning program is also supported by the South Dakota Feed Manufacturers Association, the South Dakota Livestock Association, the South Dakota Livestock Auction Markets Association, the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, and the South Dakota Veterinary Medical Association.

Any cow-calf producer can participate; he does not need to belong to any livestock group. The simplest way for him to start is to call his veterinarian, who will be administering or validating the immunizations anyway. The vet will provide the certificate and the ear tags.

Or the producer may check with his county agent or any of the authors of this fact sheet. The producer may check with his county agent or any of the authors of this fact sheet.

Coupled with a total herd health plan, the preconditioning program gives the producer heavier, healthier calves for the market and a dependable reputation as a breeder of quality, high-performance calves.

Preconditioning: applied common sense

Preconditioning is the preparation of a calf, which has been nursing its mother, to better withstand the stress of movement from its production site to the feedlot.

It is a complete health management program. Preconditioning feeder calves means they are prepared to withstand the stress and adjustment they undergo when they leave their point of origin enroute to the feedlot.

In simple terms, preconditioning is a management tool which combines familiar practices to produce and market healthy feeder calves. Basically, preconditioning is the application of common sense and sound management/marketing practices.

Successful preconditioning: summary

1. Bull calves castrated and healed.
2. Horned calves dehorned and healed.
3. Weaned for at least 30 days.
4. Water trough and feed bunk adjusted (30 days).
5. The following immunizations after 4 months of age and at least 3 weeks before sale:
   a) IBR
   b) PI
   c) BVD
   d) 7-way clostridial
7. Owned by the seller 60 days prior to sale.
8. Calves identified with official “green tag” in left ear and accompanied by the BCIA certificate signed by the owner and veterinarian.

Castrating, dehorning, and weaning practices

A preconditioned calf should be dehorned and castrated (as young as possible) when still nursing its dam, preferably during the spring of the year. If done at a later date, dehorning and castration wounds must be healed by sale time.

A preconditioned calf must be weaned for at least 30 days before being sold.

Water trough and feed bunk adjustment at production site

A preconditioned calf must have the opportunity to accustom itself to water troughs and feed bunks for at least 30 days prior to sale. This practice will insure adaptation to feedlot rations and environment.

This adjustment period of 30 days at the site of origin will also result in heavier calves and less shrink. Records indicate that during this period a calf will easily gain from 1½ to 2½ lb per day.

The producer has the option of feeding home grown rations or selecting a commercial preconditioning ration.

Proper immunizations

To reduce losses associated with shipping fever and other feedlot diseases, the preconditioned calf must be properly vaccinated against several diseases.

Vaccination of the calves is part of the total herd health management program. It is essential that an adequate cow herd vaccination program be implemented before even considering preconditioning calves. If not, the economic benefits of preconditioning will not materialize.

Preconditioned calves must receive the following immunizations at least 3 weeks before shipment and must be at least 4 months old when vaccinated:
- IBR (“red nose”)
- PI (parainfluenza-3)
- BVD (bovine virus diarrhea)
- “7-way” clostridial bacterin (to protect calves against black leg, malignant edema, overeating types B, C and D, Cl. novyi and Cl. sordelli)

The South Dakota preconditioning program requires that the mandatory

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vaccinations be administered no later than 21 days before the sale. However, participants in the program are encouraged to administer the vaccines at least 2 weeks before weaning to reduce stress and to insure maximum immunity at the time they wean their calves.

It must be re-emphasized that, although needed, immunizations are only one aspect of preconditioning and only a part of complete herd health management. Their timely use cannot be divorced from proper nutrition, reduction of stress, managerial soundness, and a productive relation with the local veterinarian.

Control of parasites

Preconditioned calves must receive grub and lice treatment. Although desirable, worming is not mandatory.

Identification and certification

Individual identification of each preconditioned calf and written certification of the practices involved are indispensable components of the program. They facilitate marketing preconditioned calves, assure maximum economic returns, enable "tracebacks," give the feedlot owner reliable information to determine if further processing is needed, and provide data to evaluate the overall performance of the program.

Preconditioned calves are identified by a green, serially numbered, metal tag placed in the left ear. The certificate is signed by the seller and his veterinarian. Tags and certificates are distributed by practicing veterinarians.

Wrap-up: benefits of preconditioning

The benefits of preconditioning fall into three categories: benefits for the calf, benefits for the seller, and benefits for the buyer.

Benefits for the calf: A preconditioned calf is an all around better calf than one which is not preconditioned.
- Stress is reduced to a minimum.
- Death and disease losses are cut down dramatically.
- Preconditioned calves have been adequately immunized against costly diseases and external parasites are controlled.
- Preconditioned calves are ready to move into a feedlot.

Benefits for the seller: The seller of preconditioned calves realizes a return on his investment. Preconditioned calves are substantially heavier than their nonpreconditioned counterparts. This extra weight alone should pay for feed, vaccines and parasite control and, under present market conditions, assure an additional net profit.

Once a producer establishes a reputation for high quality, healthy preconditioned calves, the probability for a premium price should increase, further enhancing the profit potential.

Ultimately, preconditioning enables the cow-calf producer to maximize his production capabilities.

Benefits for the buyer: Sickness and death losses in the feedlot will be greatly reduced by preconditioning. Calves go on feed much quicker; they shrink less and have fewer problems with adaptation to feedbunks. Preconditioning results in minimum processing once calves reach the feedlot. Feed efficiency and weight gains are improved.

An industry program: For the cow-calf producer and the feedlot operator, preconditioning means just one thing: economic return. Hopefully, the economic benefits of a certified preconditioning program will be shared by all segments of the beef industry.