

Beef Up



Stocker Management

Stocker cattle management should concentrate on cattle health.

Story & photo by **Kay Ledbetter**, Texas AgriLife Research & Extension

Stocker cattle health has always been a challenge, but the challenge has increased over the years and producers may need to beef up their management plans, according to a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service specialist.

“We have some of the best vaccines and technology available to us, but the mortality number has continued to rise,” said Ted McCollum, AgriLife Extension beef cattle specialist in Amarillo. “Health is the first management challenge faced by stocker-cattle producers.”

Where did the calves come from? How were they managed before being sold? What did they go through during procurement and transportation? What are the conditions, labor availability and management processes after they arrive?

“The restrictions on some of the tools, specifically antibiotics, we have to treat and manage these cattle with are being tightened, so we need to know what we can do from a management standpoint to improve handling and reduce the stressors that lead to health problems.”

Treatment small part of cost

McCollum estimated that with current costs, every 1% increase in morbidity or incidence of disease in a set of calves reduces profit by \$1.43 for every calf in the group. Breaking it down further, 62% of the \$1.43 is attributed to mortality of the calves that became sick, another 21% to reduced performance of sick calves and finally 17% to costs of treating the sick calves.

“The inclination is to chisel on the treatment costs, which contribute the least amount to the overall cost of morbidity and is our primary tool to reduce severity of the

disease and hopefully reduce death loss, the primary contributor to the cost of morbidity,” McCollum said.

He said weaning stress, exposure to pathogens, handling and management, marketing, and transportation prior to purchase and arrival are things the stocker cattle owner has little control over. However, stressors associated with adapting to their new environment, commingling, nutrition, handling and processing can be addressed post-arrival by the owner and others tending to the calves.

“Be smart about where you are purchasing your calves, evaluate your post-arrival program — people, place, process — and address those factors that can reduce the stress load on the calves,” McCollum said.

Once the calves are straightened out, settled and ready to turn out onto wheat pasture, the primary focus turns to managing for performance, and stocking pressure is a key drive to consider, he said.

Forage intake, and hence weight gain, is influenced by forage availability, McCollum said. Stocking pressure, or pounds of cattle per acre, affect the forage allocation and how much each animal can consume.

“To demonstrate, a study over two winter-wheat-grazing periods in Bushland showed that for every 50 pounds we increased our stocking pressure, the average daily gain declined by between a quarter and three-tenths of a pound per day,” he said. “What is the right stocking pressure on wheat? The answer varies depending on forage production, cost inputs and value of weight gain.”

Heed mineral nutrition

In addition to managing forage availability,

he said producers might also consider the nutrient sources for the cattle.

“Do not assume that cattle on wheat pasture don’t need a mineral supplement,” McCollum said. “Mineral supplements can easily pay for themselves with increased gain. Based on research, simply adding a mineral supplement can result in an additional quarter pound per day gain. And if you add in Rumensin, it can add another quarter pound of gain per day.”

At the current value for added weight in stockers, a producer could spend as much as \$3,500 a ton for the mineral supplement and pay for it with these results, he said.

McCollum said producers could also consider providing some extra energy to the cattle. Energy supplements can improve weight gain and also add some stability to performance during the winter months when forage availability and inclement weather can slow performance of the calves.

The amount of supplement provided to the calves depends on the performance objectives, he said. With current feed prices and values for added weight, supplementation should be considered.

Some other options he said producers might consider in their management strategies for stocker cattle on winter pasture are implants and possibly feeding silage to stabilize weight gains if there’s concern about running out of pasture before the winter is over.

“With the wet and cold forecast for this winter, these supplementation programs are a bit of insurance against production risks,” he said.



Editor’s Note: Kay Ledbetter is a communications specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Research and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.